

THRILLING DETECTIVE

10¢

FEB.

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

Quest OF MURDER

*A Gripping
Mystery Novel*
By H. RALPH
GOLLER

**THE FAT
UNDERTAKER**
A Baffling Novelet
By G. T.
FLEMING-ROBERTS

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THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. L, No. 2

EVERY STORY BRAND NEW

February, 1944



A Gripping Mystery Novel

GUEST OF MURDER

By H. RALPH GOLLER

A pretty girl's smile sends Sergeant Bruce Haiden, former private detective, on a trail of fiendish crime that calls for all his ingenuity and iron nerve! 13

Two Exciting Complete Novelets

THE FAT UNDERTAKER G. T. Fleming-Roberts 46

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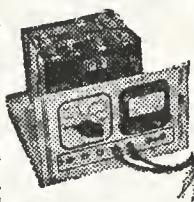
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HEADQUARTERS

Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet



THE time has come again down here at Headquarters to go over the blotter and see what is scheduled for investigation or trial in the next issue of **THRILLING DETECTIVE**. So if you boys off duty will gather around we will see what the up-to-the-minute reports are on **DETOUR TO DEATH**.

The sign, painted in crude black letters on a board, contained only one word: *Detour*.

Adam Graves stared at the sign bitterly; then he looked at the barricade in front of the car. Finally he looked at the narrow, crooked, rutted dirt road which led between sun-bleached and weed-choked fence rows into a wood. The prospect of having to bounce over this red-clay detour into the Kentucky back-country was enough to make a preacher cuss. And Graves was not a preacher. He was a furniture installment collector.

"There is no other way to go," said the girl beside him, glancing at his slightly averted face. She was a pretty thing, this girl, with her bright blond hair, red lips, blue eyes and delicately molded head.

But Graves didn't know anything about her. She was a hitch-hiker. At least, she had seemed so forlorn and helpless standing alone in the hot sunshine beside the graveled road, a battered overnight bag in her hand, that Adam Graves had voluntarily stopped his car and offered her a lift.

An Amazing Experience

Now, with Karen Locke beside him, Adam Graves turned off the graveled county road onto a rough and ugly detour. And he de-

toured into the most amazing and dangerous experience he had ever encountered in his well-ordered existence.

DETOUR TO DEATH, by James P. Webb, the complete novel which is featured in next issue, is an exceptionally fine story that is rich in characterization, human interest, intrigue, mystery—and violent death. For a change the hero, Adam Graves, is not a detective—not even the amateur kind.

He gets into a terribly bad jam, and how he works his way out of it makes an engrossing story that is replete with thrills and chills. And the recording by Author Webb is so plausible and graphic that you will finish the story thinking, not only could this have easily happened—it *must* have happened! It could happen to me—to anybody!

A Powerful Novelet

The featured novelet next issue shifts the scene from Kentucky to the Eastern seaboard. Sports reporter Johnny Castle, whom you'll meet on page 69 of this issue you are reading, again stars in a smashing yarn! With his nosey nose for news, he gets himself interested in things when he sees the daughter of an old-time baseball player playing around with a known gangster.

The deeper Castle gets into the matter, the uglier and more menacing the mess becomes. Before he quite realizes it, Johnny Castle is gathering plenty of news the hard way. In clipped, hard-boiled style, Castle tells us the story himself. And he runs into plenty of action and mystery in the cleaning up of the dirty business.

(Continued on page 10)



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... about Protestants

"They are so meek I could crush them."

... about Catholics

"Theirs is the most corrupt church on the face of the earth."

... about Jews

"The Jews' final goal is the victory of Democracy . . . because it eliminates personality and puts in its place stupidity and cowardice."

"Hate the Protestants! Hate the Catholics! Hate the Jews!"

Hate, hate, hate, says Hitler. Hate, hate, hate, say those who echo him, here and everywhere.

But this is America! And America is made up practically 100% of Protestants, Catholics and Jews. In the three quotations above, Hitler takes in just about all of us.

Nobody left out! Because, you see, it's really a suicide pact to which we're all invited. *It was meant to be so.* A suicide pact for all America.

Remember that next time you hear *anyone* insult any group here in America.

Remember, always that it's someone just like him who is whispering the same kind of thing about the group to which *you* belong.

Look upon all such whispers as invitations to join that national suicide pact.

Refuse to accept such invitations. And don't hesitate to accuse those who offer them to you of working for America's destruction.

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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 6)

MURDER IN MINK, by C. S. Montanye, is a fast-paced and incredibly real and appealing yarn of a sports writer who becomes involved in murder in Manhattan with no holds barred and death as the referee. You are going to be sorry when you come to the last page of this stirring yarn.

Gripping Short Stories

Besides the two exceptionally strong stories above mentioned there will be a formidable array of sparkling and punchy short stories which we have selected from the police blotter.

These short yarns are by some of your favorite authors and carry a kick like a blockbuster. Don't overlook them as you leaf through the book. They are calculated for your broken reading time.

And how about taking a few minutes of your spare time and writing in to Headquarters to report on the stories? Because it is our firm and avowed intention to build **THRILLING DETECTIVE** into one of the best magazines you can buy anywhere, we particularly want to know what you like and do not like. We aren't satisfied with our magazine being a good one; we want you to feel that it is one of the very best.

Here is a report from a reader who covers a lot of territory himself:

I read many of the various detective magazines appearing regularly on the newsstands, including every one of your companion magazines mentioned in your November issue on page 12. I buy these publications in a territory I travel of twelve states, and I have done so for many years. But this is the first time I have ever written the editor of any of them.

I desire to compliment you on your November issue of **THRILLING DETECTIVE**. It is well balanced and your characters improve with age, as it were. Norman Conquest, Willie Brann—the lead-and-peanut-shell-shooting sleuth—are real favorites of mine. But, alas, being human, I must mention a seeming discrepancy in the Norman Conquest novel in this issue, by its author, Berkeley Gray.

The Voice and his Black Ring, as blackmailers, presumably have only been operating three or four months when Conquest returns to New York City and encounters Molly Langford who is one of their blackmail victims. Later on she tells that every Monday twenty dollars have been collected from her by various means—but at the end of this interesting tale Norman Conquest returns to her six hundred and forty dollars, evidently the total of the money she had paid the blackmailers over a period of thirty-two weeks—nearly three years. Yes? No?

Anyway, I am still going to read **THRILLING DETECTIVE**, buying it whenever it appears on the stands. Keep the good work up, and the best of luck to you.—O. M. Wells, Mobile, Ala.

FIGHT INFANTILE PARALYSIS

Join "The March of Dimes"

Shame on you, Mr. Wells. Thirty-two weeks is only something more than seven months on our calendar, not three years. But at that, we'll bet it seemed like three years to the distraught lady in question. And thank you for the nice things you say about **THRILLING DETECTIVE**. We are going to do our dead level best to keep on improving the magazine every issue! Here is a comment on the December number:

Two real good long stories in the December TD—"The Prize Ring Murders," and "Fan Mail for Tojo." I liked 'em. I note, too, that Benton Brader can write other stories besides yarns about Willie Brann. Nice going. I believe you people are not spoofing when you say you are making TD better all the time. I thought it was pretty good in the past, but the stories are developing a more real and human interest feel to them. I'm getting to where I look forward to the next issue with a sort of savage hunger. Don't let me down.
—George K. Booth, Chicago, Ill.

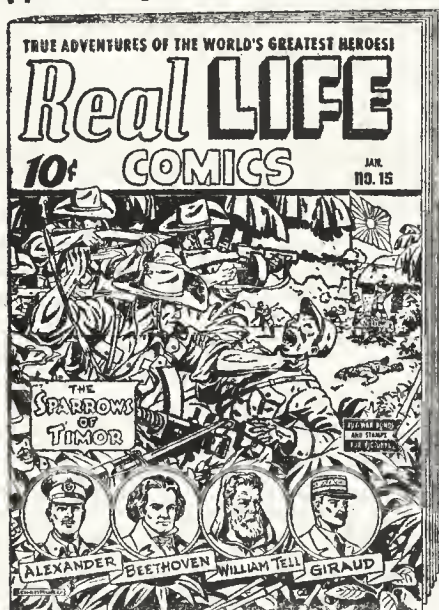
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Sergeant Haiden
leaned back at
ease and looked
at the girl beside
him

GUEST OF MURDER

By H. RALPH GOLLER

A pretty girl's smile sends Sergeant Bruce Haiden, former private detective, on a trail of fiendish crime that calls for all his ingenuity and iron nerve!

CHAPTER I

RAIN AND A GIRL

THUNDER followed the flash of lightning, then came the rain. It pelted down in a torrent. Headlights glittered ghostly on the washed concrete.

But Sergeant Bruce Haiden didn't mind. He was dry. He had a three-day leave, a hundred dollars in his pocket, a girl with a car, and an invitation to dinner.

He leaned back at ease and looked at the girl under the wheel beside him. That he had never seen her before made no difference. She was a slim brunette, beautiful, and, he guessed, twenty-one. Class, too, she was. Nothing else mattered at the moment.

She had picked him up in a little town five minutes after he stepped from another car. In fact, just as it had begun to rain. After a mile of careful appraisal of his six feet of soldiery manliness, she had invited him to dinner.

A GRIPPING MYSTERY NOVEL

Being a man who appreciated beauty and adventure, to say nothing of a promising dinner, he had accepted.

"I'm on my way home now, she had said. "It's almost dinner time, and I know the family will appreciate having you. Afterward we'll run in to Riverdale to a dance or a movie. Then you can go on to Los Angeles."

Bruce Haiden had thought the invitation a little out of the ordinary, but he had been told California was out of the ordinary. He liked people and places that way. It added to the spice of life, and after weeks of Army life on the desert one needed something out of the ordinary. Of course, he couldn't know what he was letting himself in for.

The lights of a town shone dully ahead. There hadn't been much chance for conversation with the rain pouring down in sheets, and with traffic and glaring headlights racing at them. But as the girl slowed down for the town, Bruce ventured to introduce himself.

"Bruce Haiden is the name, ex-private detective, and now sergeant in Uncle's Glider Corps."

"I'm Claudia Lorrell."

She turned her head and smiled. It was hardly a free smile. The detective still in Bruce told him it was a little forced, if not a little troubled. It excited his curiosity, made him want to know more than just her name. And without benefit of company.

"I'm afraid we'll be a little late for dinner," he said, suddenly remembering the hour, and his manners. "Suppose we stop in this town for dinner. I don't care to put you, or your family to any trouble."

ANOTHER smile parted carmine lips, exposing white, even teeth.

"I thrive on trouble," she told him, "and I know you'll get a thrill out of meeting the family. I live just beyond this town. In fact, in the city—even if it is in an orange grove. Then the cafés in this town are always crowded on Saturday nights."

Bruce had met families before, and had experienced no thrills. But he had never been able to refuse a pretty girl.

Then, for some reason, he didn't want to refuse her invitation. This might be different. There was something about her that intrigued him. It could be her

troubled smile, or the flashing glimpses of mischievousness he caught in her eyes. Or maybe it was the promise of a dance or a movie later on. He didn't really care.

In any event, they were past the town before he could make up his mind. Then it was too late.

The girl turned in at an invisible drive. The tires sang on gravel. Then a big, rambling two-story ranchhouse leaped out of the rain.

"Here we are," the girl said, bringing the coupé to a stop before a broad veranda.

There were two other cars in the drive, Bruce noted, as he held the car door open for the girl. It looked like a party, and he had hoped to have the girl to himself. But no matter. He was her guest.

The girl turned sparkling brown eyes on him as she opened the door.

"Don't be surprised at anything," she said. "The Lorrell family is quite a mixture."

Before Bruce had time to think that over he was pushed into a big, dimly lighted living room. A man and a woman standing before a huge fireplace turned as they entered.

"Hi, Mother!" the girl greeted the woman airily, too airily, Bruce thought. "Are we late for dinner?"

The woman stepped away from the fireplace, the flames from the blazing log making her stand out a slim, striking blond woman of beauty. Momentary surprise rounded her eyes.

"Yes, darling," she replied. "Your father was anxious to settle a business matter, so we didn't wait."

"Oh, well!" The girl who said her name was Claudia tossed off her wrap, shrugged trim shoulders. "We'll eat in the breakfast nook. That'll be more cozy anyway . . . Oh, I almost forgot." She gave Bruce a tantalizing, mischievous smile. "I want you to meet my fiancé, Sergeant George Hopper."

Five years a private detective had injured Bruce Haiden to most surprises. But this wasn't a surprise. It was a shock. He was sure his jaw fell and his eyes popped open. He was equally sure he flushed.

Yet, his shock wasn't any greater than that of Mrs. Lorrell. Her rouged lips fell apart and her blue eyes became



Bruce was on his knees, studying the position of the body, the gun

saucer-like. She couldn't speak. She just stared at the girl.

Bruce recovered his composure with an effort, and bowed. He was conscious of a dry chuckle beyond the woman. There was the distinct shattering of a dropped glass beyond a partly closed door. Then the door swung open, and two men stepped into the room.

Claudia Lorrell was still chattering gayly.

"Sergeant Hopper, Dad," she said to a tall, distinguished gray-haired man. "And Mr. Parks, George." She gave the handsome Mr. Parks a wicked smile that told plenty. "That's all, I think. Oh, no. Here's a gentleman I missed. But I don't think we've met before."

The apish little man of the chuckle stepped forward with a smile that split his face.

"I haven't had that pleasure, Miss Lorrell," he said smoothly. "Frank Crosby is the name, and I congratulate you on your choice of a man."

BRUCE HAIDEN was like a lost soul in the middle of an ocean. The introductions, combined with the shock of being an engaged man were too much for him. But he had been promised a thrill and he was game. With a frozen smile on his face, he nodded to each of the men. His voice was stuck somewhere in his throat. Before he could find it, Claudia had him by the arm, and was leading him from the room.

"We haven't eaten, and I know you'll excuse us," she said over her shoulder, as she pushed her charge through a door.

Bruce was alone in the breakfast nook with the girl before he found his voice. He ran his finger around his collar to loosen it. Then he just looked at the girl with tolerant disapproval. It took him a minute to get his mind in order.

"What's the idea?" he demanded, grabbing her by the shoulders and whirling her around, his gray eyes boring into hers. "I told you my right name, yet you introduced me under another—if it was an introduction. I took you for a lady, but now I'm not so sure."

Her brown eyes laughed at him. "I promised you a thrill, didn't I?"

Bruce Haiden let his hands drop. "It wasn't a thrill. I don't know what it was—darned if I do. If it wasn't rain-

ing I'd walk out on you. Still, I've never walked out on a girl yet."

The girl sobered.

"You're swell, Sergeant. We'll eat, then take in the dance at Riverdale."

"The sooner we get out of here the better." Bruce ran his finger around his collar again. "I don't like flying under false colors."

"I'm the one flying under false colors." Her eyes were pleading now. "Play along with me for a while—and you'll be serving your country by protecting the woman left behind."

Bruce opened his mouth to speak, but she whirled away. She was back in a moment with the makings for a highball.

"You mix the drinks and I'll get the grub on the table," she said. "Make mine weak."

She went into the kitchen.

Bruce thoughtfully mixed the drinks, his mind a jumble of thoughts that didn't make sense. From the living room came a murmur of voices. He knew he was being discussed. He doubled the whisky in his drink.

Claudia returned with a plate of sliced roast turkey. She made four trips to the kitchen. There was nothing frugal in the dinner she placed on the table. She had promised him not only a thrill, but a dinner. Both were complete, with the trimmings.

"Eat, drink, and be merry," she said, smiling with her eyes.

"For I've got a three-days leave, and I'm engaged already," Bruce added, and touched her glass. "Luck, whatever your scheme is."

"I'll break the engagement after the dance."

She lifted her glass to her lips.

Bruce studied her over his glass. That she was playing a deep game with a bravado unnatural for her, he could guess. The answer, of course, was with those in the living room.

"I was once a fairly clever detective," he told her. "At least, my boss used to tell me so. If you'll tell me what's troubling you, I might be able to help still more."

"Let's eat," she evaded.

"Is it the man who dropped the glass?"

"Did someone drop a glass?" She smiled at him, a forced smile. "Mother

will be angry. She's fussy about the rugs."

Haiden decided he liked the girl after all, and grinned at her.

"Don't you trust your fiancé enough to tell him your troubles?" he asked. "Engaged people shouldn't have secrets, you know."

"It's just a lark," she passed it off. "I'll explain at the dance."

Bruce sighed, shrugged, and attacked the food before him. After all, he was hungry, and it was the girl's treat. Tomorrow she would be but a memory. One of those memories a man likes to reminisce over in later years.

They finished dinner in silence.

"I'll have to leave you in the living room while I dress," Claudia explained as she led him into the big room. "Just make yourself at home. And—we met at Twenty-nine Palms last summer. It doesn't matter how. I spend a lot of time there on the desert, or did before gas rationing."

She pushed him into a big easy chair before the fireplace, and ran up the stairs.

Bruce looked about the room. It was richly furnished, but hardly modern. It spoke of moderate wealth. He lighted a cigarette, and leaned back at ease. He was alone in the room.

The headlights of a car coming in the drive flashed briefly by a window, then vanished. A door slammed somewhere. Then Mrs. Lorrell, the girl's blond mother, came quietly down the stairs.

CHAPTER II

THE THRILL IS MURDER



MRS. LORRELL did not see Bruce immediately in the big chair, and he idly studied her. He hadn't had time for more than a glance at her before. Now he realized she was all he had thought her.

The years—Bruce guessed them at forty—had left their marks, but lightly, thanks to the beauty salon. Her eyes were round and blue, set in a slightly tanned face, suggestive of beach and desert, of grace, of strength of purpose. Her slenderness was suggestive of a frailness, but her beauty could not be questioned. Nor the blondness of her hair.

She gave a little gasp as she crossed the room and discovered the sergeant hidden in the chair. The pink handkerchief was clutched to her chest with a nervous gesture. Then she smiled.

"You startled me," she said in a rich soprano voice, the handkerchief slipping from her fingers.

"I'm sorry." Bruce retrieved the pink handkerchief from the rug, stood up.

"Oh, don't be." She accepted the handkerchief, began twisting it in well-manicured hands. "Claudia's engagement has been a little upsetting. We didn't know. But she is always surprising us."

"I'm surprised myself." Bruce grinned.

Lorrell came down the stairs at that moment. He glanced briefly at Bruce, then at his wife.

"I expected to find Parks here," he told her. "He seems to have a habit of wandering around." There was annoyance in his voice.

"Possibly he stepped out on the porch, or into the den," suggested his wife.

Lorrell crossed the room, and flung open the door Bruce had first seen him enter by. He stopped short in the doorway, the color draining from his face.

"Great heavens above!" came from his choked throat.

"What is it, Lewis?" Mrs. Lorrell hurried to her husband, looking past him into the den.

Then she screamed.

Bruce Haiden was leaping across the room before her scream had died away. He caught her as she started to fall. Instantly his eyes darted into the den.

The man he had heard called Parks was sprawled face down on the floor beside the desk, an arrow protruding from his back!

Bruce Haiden was no longer a detective. As a soldier, he knew he shouldn't become involved in a problem when a dead man played the star rôle. Yet, the protruding arrow seemed to have the power of a magnet. During his career as a detective he had worked on several murder cases with successful results. And this was murder! His one glance into the den had been enough to assure him of this fact.

He glanced down at the limp woman in his arms. She was coming back to life.

"Do you think you can manage now?" he asked her.

Mrs. Lorrell drew a jerky breath, nodded. Bruce led her to a chair.

Lorrell was still standing in the doorway, staring, when Bruce stepped past him into the den. He was again the detective, his gray eyes missing nothing.

He crossed to the flat-topped desk at the far end of the room, and looked down at the body. The arrow had struck Parks to the right of the spine and had gone through his body to pierce his heart.

Bruce lifted his eyes to the double French doors beside the body. One door was open. There was no screen. The overturned chair, the book on the floor, suggested that Parks had been standing with his back to the door when the arrow struck him. In falling, he had overturned the chair and knocked the book from the desk.

BRUCE stepped around the body to the open door and looked out into the wet night. There was a flagstone *patio* beyond the door. The den, he discovered, occupied a wing built out from the main house, forming an el. The angle of the arrow through the body suggested that the murderer had stood near the corner of the house some twenty feet away and loosed the arrow.

Turning back to the desk, Bruce Haiden found Lorrell bending over the slain man. Automatically he noted that Lorrell's clothes were dry. There was nothing to indicate he had been out in the rain.

"The only thing we can do is close the room and call the police," Bruce said grimly. "This is murder."

Lorrell straightened, drew in a deep breath, and nodded. There was nothing distinguished about the man now. He was just tired, worried, suddenly old and care-worn. He nodded again and reached for the telephone on the desk.

Bruce caught his arm. "Is there another phone in the house?"

"Yes. The extension phone in the kitchen. I understand what you mean. I'll phone from the kitchen."

Bruce followed him from the living room, closing the door behind him. Lorrell paused in the living room, glanced quickly about at the household Mrs. Lorrell's scream had brought running.

"Marvin Parks has been—murdered," he explained in a hollow voice. "No one is to enter the den."

He hurried toward the kitchen, shoulders sagging.

Bruce stood before the closed door and looked slowly from face to face. The apish Frank Crosby stood with his back to the fireplace, hands behind him. His thin, wizened face was expressionless.

Claudia stood in the center of the room, wide-eyed with horror. Beside her was a lanky, sandy-thatched youth of eighteen or nineteen, scowling at nothing.

"This is terrible!" wailed Mrs. Lorrell, her round eyes staring at the crackling fire, her hands wrecking her pink handkerchief. "Murder! In my house!"

Bruce caught Claudia's eye, then glanced at the youth beside her. If his guess was correct, the youth had been the one who had driven in a few minutes before.

The girl bit her lip.

"Uh-h, George," she murmured, "this is my foster brother, Tom Lorrell . . . Tom, Sergeant Hopper, my fiancé."

Tom Lorrell glanced at the girl, at Bruce, then grinned, and stuck out a rain-dampened hand.

"Fast work, Sis," he said. "But I'm glad to see he is big and tough-lookin', and not one of those fancy guys. How are you, Sergeant!"

His grip was as firm, his smile as friendly as his eyes were keen. Bruce liked the boy instantly.

"You're big and tough-looking yourself," Bruce said, grinned. "Didn't you just drive in?"

"About ten minutes ago. Just got back from enlisting in the Air Corps. This's a heck of a mess for Sis to drag you into."

"George was a detective before the Army got him," Claudia said. "He'll have the murderer in no time. Won't you, darling?"

"I'd much rather go to that dance than hunt a murderer," Bruce parried, wishing he had never seen the girl.

"What's that—a detective?" Lorrell inquired, entering the room. "Possibly he's just the man we need at the moment. The phone is dead. Wires down, probably."

There was a moment of tension in the room. Everyone stared at Bruce.

It made him feel uncomfortable. A stranger in a house of murder. Worse, he had been introduced under a fictitious name. The full force of his predicament struck him with the force of a blow. It was a spot he didn't relish.

He knew he should volunteer to go for the police, then quickly disappear. Yet, running out on a girl wasn't in his make-up.

"I'll do what I can," he said. "Though I won't promise to hand the murderer over. He's miles away by this time."

"We'll appreciate anything you can do, Sergeant," Lorrell said, mopping a sweat-beaded brow. "Since you no doubt have had experience in this sort of—business—I'd like to have you take charge until such time as we can get in touch with the police. We'll take orders from you."

"I served a hitch in the Army when I was a kid," Crosby chuckled dryly from the fireplace. "Reckon I still can take orders. What's the order of the day, Sergeant?"

Bruce Haiden's jaw tightened. He didn't like being put in the spotlight, but there was no help for it. Three-days' leave. It was a slap in the face. He might get more than that if he couldn't extract himself from this mess.

"The first thing is to make an effort to notify the police," he explained. "I'll ask for a volunteer."

Crosby stepped forward. "I'm a tough old desert rat. A little rain won't hurt me. My car's in the drive. If anybody can round up the cops, I can."

Bruce hesitated a moment. Crosby could be the murderer as well as anybody. The bulge under his left arm could mean a concealed gun—probably did. Yet, an arrow had been the murder weapon. And any of the others could have committed the crime.

"You'll do as well as anybody," he said. "You know where to find the police, I suppose?"

Crosby grinned. "I reckon. Old Andy tossed me in his calaboose once 'cause I wouldn't tell him where I bought my likker. That was durin' Prohibition. Andy ain't so bright, but mebbe you can give him a few pointers."

He left the room still grinning.

"Do we have to stay cooped up in this room?" Tom Lorrell asked. "I want to review my math."



The tree limb bent to let Bruce Haiden to the ground

"Just don't leave the house," Bruce said. "I may want to ask a few questions later. Certainly the police will."

"I think I'll go lie down," Mrs. Lorrell murmured. "I feel a little faint."

She climbed the thick-carpeted stairs on the heels of Tom Lorrell.

Lorrell, the father, crossed to the fireplace, and slumped down in the big easy chair.

Bruce glanced meaningly at Claudia, and led the way into the breakfast nook.

"So this is what you invited me to," he snapped harshly, as the door closed behind her. "You wanted a sucker, and I was handy."

Claudia bit her lip. Tears were threatening her eyes.

"Please, Bruce. How could I know anything like this was going to happen? I—I'm sorry I got you into it. But believe me, I'll get you out—even if I have to confess to murder."

"If I was in my right mind, I'd walk out on you and let you take the rap," he said sourly.

"I wouldn't blame you if you did," she said. "Maybe that's why I introduced you as George Hopper—so you could walk out and no one would know who you really were."

Bruce took her chin in his hand and looked deep into her misty, troubled eyes. He saw no guile—just misery.

"All right," he told her. "You can start talking. You picked me up for a purpose other than just taking me to dinner. I have a right to know what it's all about—now. I can feed you to the wolves if you don't come clean."

CHAPTER III

BRUCE TAKES OVER



THE girl slumped into a chair, and fought threatening tears. For a moment Bruce Haiden thought she was going to crack and be just another girl. Then her chin came up. She looked Bruce squarely in the eyes.

"I'll come clean," she said, "though I don't know what it's all about, really. It's something about Father's mine in Arizona, I think. Parks is—was a mining engineer. I met him a month ago. Right away he started annoying me, making love to me. As if I'd be inter-

ested in a man past forty! I don't mind saying I hated the sight of him. He proposed a dozen times. Today he hinted I'd see his way after tonight."

She paused, then with a flashing glance at Bruce, as if to say she hoped he understood, she went on.

"I didn't know what to think or do. I had a tank full of gas, so I went for a drive. Then I saw you. I thought if I introduced you as my fiancé, he would let me alone."

"A fairly good motive for murder," Bruce commented thoughtfully. "I gather there was some business deal pending that possibly concerned you. The mine, possibly?"

"Possibly. I hate to say it—but I think Parks had something on Father. Something—well, like blackmail, or what amounted to as much."

"Interesting." Bruce shrugged, and shoved his hands into his pockets. "And you think you were the price of whatever Parks had on your father?"

"I don't know."

Bruce took a turn about the room. His thoughts were beginning to take form. He was getting back into the old groove.

"You introduced Tom Lorrell as your foster brother," he finally said. "What is your relationship to the Lorrells?"

"I'm an adopted daughter."

Bruce sat on the edge of the table. He studied the profile of the girl for a moment from under drooping eyelids. He had been right. Certainly she didn't resemble any of the Lorrells.

He was about to ask another question, when she said abruptly:

"My mother died when I was born. My father was killed in a mine accident when I was a year old. He was superintendent of the Bonanza Mine."

"Is this Bonanza Mine the one you referred to?" asked Bruce.

"Yes. It's been closed for several years. The vein was lost. A fault, or something. I know nothing about mines."

"Gold?"

The girl nodded.

Bruce considered the gold angle. Gold had been the cause of much bloodshed. It would continue to be as long as man was greedy for wealth. Yet—

"Gold mining," he observed, "is out for the duration, but it could have some-

thing to do with this murder. I'll question your father about it later." He paused, watching the pupils of the girl's eyes. Then he asked: "Are you an archer?"

Claudia lifted surprised eyes. "Why, yes. I'm fairly good at archery."

Bruce frowned. He had hoped the girl would answer in the negative, but he controlled his thoughts.

"Anybody else in the family familiar with the sport?"

"Yes. We're all pretty good. Why do you ask?"

Bruce sighed and reached for his cigarettes. Claudia shook her head when he offered her one. He thoughtfully lighted up.

"That's going to complicate the case," he said. "How about Crosby?"

"I never met him until tonight." Her eyes quickened with interest. "Why are you interested in archery?"

"Because Parks was killed with an arrow. Didn't you know?"

"Oh!"

The exclamation was barely audible. Claudia slumped farther down on her chair. She didn't meet Bruce's boring eyes and it seemed apparent that she hadn't known.

BRUCE was sure the girl was innocent. There was no betrayal in her voice, in her actions. He was glad of this much. Yet the police might connect her. He crushed his cigarette in an ash-tray.

"I'm beginning to think you're on the level," he said, after a moment. "You could be acting—but I'm going to take a chance on you."

Claudia came slowly to her feet. Her chin came up. Her eyes flashed, exposing a fighting trait.

"You came through for me," she said, and smiled. "I'll do the same for you."

Bruce was forced to grin wryly. "Good. I was sure you would. Only your father and I know Parks was murdered with an arrow."

"And me now."

"You have only my word for it," Bruce corrected. "What I want is a chance to have a look at all the archery sets in the house. I'll need a guide familiar with the house."

"Father and Mother keep their archery equipment in the basement," the girl

explained. "Tom and I keep ours in our rooms. Shall we start?"

Bruce nodded. "We'll try the basement first."

Claudia started for the kitchen, Bruce at her heels. He wished he had his old flashlight. Yes, and his gun. But he was a soldier now, and Uncle Sam didn't furnish guns to men on leave.

They had just reached the kitchen, when the service porch door jarred open, and Frank Crosby staggered in, waving a brick.

"Now what the devil happened to you?"

Bruce snapped the question, then stared at the apish little man. Crosby looked like something the cats had been playing with. He was sopping wet, and in a wrathful humor.

"I found my car had a flat tire," he shrilled, still waving the brick. "I was standin' there cussin' when somebody bounced a brick off my head. Leastwise, I found this brick when I come to."

He shoved the brick in Bruce's face while he caught up with his breath.

"I'm tough an' ready, but I ain't walkin' after no cops till I get on dry clothes," he went on, slamming the brick down on the sink with such force that the tile was broken. "I'd give anything to be back on the desert."

"So would I," Bruce sympathized, and meant it. At least, he thought he did. "Mr. Lorrell is in the living room," he offered. "Maybe he can fit you out with dry clothes. My, but you're soaked!"

As he added the last, he took hold of Crosby's coat, and pulled it out from his body, exposing the left shoulder. The shoulder holster was there, but the gun was missing.

With a glare of suspicion, Crosby jerked away, and stamped into the living room.

Bruce stared at the door the apish little man had slammed through. He was fairly certain no one had left the house except Crosby himself. If no one else had, then who had bounced the brick off Crosby's head? The murderer, of course.

But who was the murderer? Not Claudia. But the others—

Then Bruce had another thought. Crosby could have knocked himself out, if he really had been out. He had had a gun and, wanting to dispose of it, had

volunteered to go for the police as an excuse to get rid of a weapon which might throw suspicion on himself.

STILL, the murder had been committed by an arrow. But the archery business, of course, could be a clever subterfuge.

Bruce glanced at the girl. She was staring at him, her head tipped to one side. He knew she was thinking much the same as he was.

"The archery investigation is off for the time," he said, frowning. "I think I'll go for the cops. How far is it to your nearest neighbor?"

Claudia's glance was questioning. "Just the other side of the highway. I'll be glad to go with you. We can take my car."

Bruce shook his head, smiled wryly. "I'm not running out. I want you to stay here and keep your eyes open. Do you think I could borrow a raincoat? A walk in the rain will sharpen my wits."

Her eyes swept over him, calculatingly. Then she pursed her lips, nodded.

"I'll get Father's. It may be a little long, and tight across the shoulders, but I think you can make out with it."

She hurried from the room.

When the hall door closed behind her, Bruce opened the living room door a crack, and peered in. Lorrell still sat slumped in the same chair. Crosby was backed up to the crackling fire, scowling at Lorrell. Neither man was saying a word.

Claudia returned with the raincoat, a pair of rubbers, and a rain hat.

"I don't want you to get wet and take cold," she explained. "I think the rubbers will fit."

They did. The coat was a little snug, as she had thought it might be. So was the hat, but coat and hat would keep him dry. He explored the pockets of the coat, found them empty, and dropped into one of them the flashlight Claudia gave him.

"Just follow the drive to the highway, cross, then turn right to the first gate," Claudia explained. "I wish you'd take my car."

Bruce shook his head. "I prefer to walk. Better stay in the living room. And keep an eye on Crosby."

He let himself out the back door. Buttoning the coat collar snugly around

his neck, he walked along the drive as far as the living room window. There he paused to look into the big room.

Claudia entered a moment later, and dropped into a chair across from her father. Crosby, mopping his face with a soiled handkerchief, looked around, then his lips began to move, but Bruce could not hear what he was saying. Lorrell nodded, and spoke to Claudia. The girl got up and started up the stairway.

Bruce had no intention of going to the neighbor to telephone before he had looked around. He swept the broad drive with the flashlight. The three cars were still in the drive. Water-filled ruts at the edge of the drive showed where Tom Lorrell had maneuvered by.

He inspected the tires of the three cars. The weather-beaten old sedan had a flat. To that extent Crosby had told the truth. Bruce, however, knew it was useless to search for the gun the man had worn. But he did want to have a look at the approximate spot the archer murderer had loosed the arrow.

THE den was on the opposite side of the house. Bruce Haiden retraced his steps to the back of the house, found a flagstone walk, and followed it around the house. The light was still burning in the den.

The wing in which the den was located protruded out from the house about fifteen feet. The open French door was some twelve feet out from the main building. Guessing at the angle of the arrow's flight, Bruce picked a spot just around the corner of the house, and possibly twenty feet from the den. A man standing by the open door, or even sitting at the desk would make an excellent target.

He played the flashlight beam about, but saw nothing. If there had been any tracks the pelting rain had destroyed them. He searched about for other possible evidence of the murderer's presence, but found none.

At the edge of the orchard some thirty feet away the beam of light revealed a telephone pole. Bruce swept it with the flash. The telephone wires were intact. He followed the wires to where they entered the house, down the wall to where they disappeared through a basement window casing.

Right then he decided he wanted to

have a look in the basement. The police still could wait a while longer.

He began looking for an outside entrance, but could find none. Pausing on the rear stoop, he debated whether to try a window, or look for a door inside.

The inside won. It was bad enough to be a guest of murder without adding house breaking. He eased the porch door open, hoping no one would come into the kitchen and surprise him. He wanted to do the surprising.

Dripping water, he poked his light about the service porch. There were two doors. One opened to the kitchen. The other—

He opened it without a sound. A stairway led down into a black void.

Locating a light switch, he clicked it. The black void vanished, and a basement was revealed. Closing the door softly behind him, he went down the stairs, nerves taut, muscles ready for any encounter.

CHAPTER IV FURLOUGH JOB



BRUCE HAIDEN located the casement the telephone wires came through into the basement. And at once discovered that the wires had been neatly clipped. He experimented, and found he could get enough slack to splice them. But first he wanted to have a look around. Almost immediately he spotted two bows and an assortment of arrows on a table. The bow strings were dry. Certainly they had not been out in the rain, unless the murderer had used extreme care and made certain no rain had touched them. Of course, the string could have been changed. There were several on the table.

Deciding the bows and arrows were a problem for the police, he returned to the telephone wires. It took him ten minutes to make the splice.

With a last look around, he left the basement. In the kitchen he found the extension phone. In a few moments he was talking to Chief Andy Holm of the local police and reported the murder.

"I want to have a talk with you, Chief," he said then, as he explained who he was and his own interest in the matter, "before you even see the corpse.

I'll be waiting where you turn off the highway."

Ten minutes later Chief Holm, and his Detective Bureau which consisted of one over-sized, but not over-fat man, stopped beside the lone figure in the Lorrell driveway.

The chief flashed a light on Bruce.

"Come in out of the rain, Soldier," he said, "and say your piece. This elephant squeezed behind the wheel here is Clyde Anderson, detective."

Bruce acknowledged the introductions and said his piece in short, clipped sentences, telling everything that had happened since Claudia Lorrell had picked him up.

"I seem to be something of a guest of murder," he concluded. "I may be asking for trouble, Chief, but I was a detective before I enlisted and it's hard to shuck off the harness. I've got a three-days' furlough, and I might as well spend it helping expose a murderer since I'm more or less on the spot. It's up to you."

Chief Holm nodded, soberly and thoughtfully. Big Clyde Anderson shook his head.

"Always figured that Lorrell girl was something of a spitfire," he mumbled, squinting at Bruce. "Never tangled with her, but—" He shook his head sadly. "Gettin' our soldiers in trouble, eh?"

The chief made up his mind. "All right, Sergeant," he said to Bruce. "You can be a detective again for three days. 'Course I'll keep an eye on you. Murders are kinda out of my line. Had one or so, but the D.A. always sent men to help me."

"Glad to have you," Anderson added, and let in the clutch. "If we bust this case before the D.A. gets on the job. I'll set up the drinks and pay your bus fare back to camp."

"That's the coroner comin'," the chief said, as a car drew up behind them. "Hope none of the suspects have skipped."

The "suspects" were all in the living room when the chief walked in, trailed by Bruce, Anderson, and the coroner, Dr. Weston. He nodded to the Lorrells, and scowled at Crosby.

Bruce smiled faintly at Claudia, and led the way into the den.

"I'll be hanged!" Chief Holm exclaimed as he stared at the dead man. In the light, he was tall, skinny, serious

faced. "Never saw anything like this fore. Do your stuff, Clyde."

CLYDE ANDERSON was fingerprint expert, photographer—in fact, the whole Detective Bureau. He went about his job methodically, but expertly.

"Right through the pump," the plump coroner explained after a swift examination. "Dead about an hour. And the Lorrells are all expert archers. But that's your job, Andy. I'll send the undertaker for the body."

He walked out.

"Arrow came through the open door, I reckon," Chief Holm said musingly. "No use lookin' outside in this rain. Who do you suspect, Sergeant?"

Bruce shrugged. "Everybody. I have questioned no one except Miss Lorrell, but I have a hunch a mine Lorrell owns has something to do with it."

"We'll ask Lorrell about that," the chief grunted and, opening the door, called Lorrell in.

Lorrell came in, gave the body a brief, shuddering glance, and looked away. His gray hair was ruffled, his black eyes shadowed. Grim lines puckered his wide mouth. It was plain the murder had hit him hard.

"I suppose Sergeant Hopper is going to give you a hand, Andy," he said, his eyes resting on Bruce. "I'm sorry this had to mar your leave, Sergeant."

Chief Holm frowned.

"Suppose you tell us about the dead man, Lewis," he said, propping his elbows on the desk. "The sergeant here tells me Parks was a mining engineer, so you might as well tell us the deal you folks had on."

Lorrell nodded. "I have nothing to hide. Parks came to me a month ago and made a bid for the Bonanza Mine. At the time I didn't think he was an engineer, but a representative for someone. I may be wrong. But he wanted the mine. He made several offers which I turned down."

"And you needin' money," Holm said, as if to himself. "I think I'd have sold it as good riddance."

"I need money, yes," Lorrell's brow creased. "But I didn't want to sell the mine. It petered out, but—" He shrugged. "Sentimental reasons, for one thing. It was discovered by my father and his partner. Besides, I am of the

opinion that there is a fault in the earth formation, and that the vein has merely been lost."

"If Parks had located the lost vein, he naturally would want to buy the mine," Bruce spoke up, his eyelids drooping lazily, thoughtfully. "Could there be anything that might force you to sell?"

"No," Lorrell glanced sharply at Bruce. "What makes you ask that?"

Bruce selected a cigarette from a soiled pack. "Just what do you know about Parks?"

"Nothing but what I've told you," Lorrell half snapped, then attempted a grin. "I've been well aware of his attention to Claudia, and her disapproval. I'm afraid she has an imagination that sometimes gets out of control."

Bruce grinned. "I've already discovered that. But let's get back to Parks. I gather he was making you a final offer tonight?"

"He was, and I was to give him my final answer."

"Did Parks make his offer?"

"No."

"And to any offer, or proposition, your answer would have been—"

"I wasn't selling," Lorrell said flatly.

BRUCE lighted his cigarette, and turned to watch Clyde Anderson, while the chief continued the questioning. The sergeant was not surprised to hear that Marvin Parks was a total stranger to Lorrell. Yet Bruce still had an idea that the mine had something to do with the murder, even if it wasn't the motive.

"Just where does Frank Crosby fit in, Mr. Lorrell?" Bruce turned back to the man.

"Oh, I can tell you about him," Lorrell seemed to be regaining his composure. "He's an old desert rat who struck it rich. A queer sort of fellow, who pops up when least expected. He stops at my office about once a year to pass the time of day, as he calls it. When I told him I had an offer for the mine, he wanted to buy it himself—for an after-the-war investment. I was surprised when he drove in this evening. Just what he has in mind, I don't know. But I wouldn't be surprised if he wasn't better acquainted with Parks than I was."

"I guess Doc can have the corpse now," Anderson spoke up, staring at the

protruding arrow. "We gonna pull that arrow out?"

Bruce bent over the arrow, studied it. A small part of the feather was missing. He spoke to Lorrell without lifting his eyes.

"Is your desk in order, Mr. Lorrell?"

Lorrell looked over his desk. "It is."

"Have you ever seen this arrow before?" Bruce straightened, crushed his cigarette in the ash-tray.

Lorrell bent over the desk to look at the arrow.

"I couldn't say," he said, after a moment. "Arrows look a lot alike to me. I rather lost interest in archery when my first wife died. The children, and the present Mrs. Lorrell have become quite expert at it." The grim lines about his mouth deepened. "I imagine you'll want to search the house?"

"Presently." Bruce glanced at Anderson. "Detective Anderson will want to question you concerning your whereabouts at the time of the murder."

Anderson glanced at his chief, received a short nod, and cleared his throat.

"I'll get that done right away. Might as well make a party of it." He opened the door. "You first, Mr. Lorrell."

When the door had closed behind them, Chief Holm had something to say. "If the weapon had been a gun," he remarked, "I'd pick Crosby for the murderer. But an archer . . . I don't think Lorrell told us all he knows about Parks. Looks to me like it's gonna be hard to nail the guilty party."

"It always is until you hit the right nail," Bruce said. "Do you know anything about Lorrell's past—his wife, and . . . Yes, Miss Lorrell?"

"Not much," the chief admitted.

"Mostly hearsay. His first wife was killed in an automobile accident ten years ago. Went over a cliff somewhere in Arizona. About that time the mine petered out and he moved here and went into the real estate business. Married Angeline West shortly after that. She was a Hollywood actress, and I reckon helped him spend his money. They've all been law-abidin' citizens."

Bruce walked to the French door and looked out. Rain still pelted down. For a moment again he wished he was back in camp. Then he knew he didn't. A rain, a girl, and murder. He was in his element.

HE CLOSED the door and was turning away when he stepped on something. Moving his foot aside he glanced down, to see a small key. He stooped and picked it up. It wasn't an ordinary key, yet it was just a key. Anybody could have dropped it. He was about to mention it to the chief when Anderson lumbered in. He dropped the key in his pocket.

"Well?"

"Not an alibi, Chief," Anderson reported. "Crosby thinks he was in the bathroom. Lorrell went up to his son's room, he says. His wife had gone to her own room, then returned to the living room. Tom supposed he was just arriving, or was in the garage. Claudia was in the breakfast nook with the sergeant, but had left him to dress. Now tell me which one to suspect."

"What about fingerprints?" Bruce asked.

The big detective shrugged. "They didn't tell a thing. Wet shoes, or clothes would have been a clue, but you say

[Turn page]

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there was nothin' doin' that way, except for Tom." He shrugged again. "Well, I reckon that noise is the morgue wagon. Haskell oughta get a repair job on that hack, or it won't last the duration."

"Let's make that bow and arrow hunt now," the chief said. "Great sport, archery, I've been told. But not for this guy."

CHAPTER V

THE SECRET OF THE TRUNK



SERGEANT BRUCE HAI-DEN expected to find an arrow missing. He was right. One was missing from Claudia's quiver. Chief Holm thought the murder was solved then, but Bruce explained the murderer had undoubtedly used the girl's arrow to throw suspicion on her.

"I don't believe Claudia could have done it," he said. "Parks had been dead for ten or fifteen minutes when he was discovered. She was with me until five minutes before that."

The chief scowled at Bruce, then turned to Anderson.

"Check the bow for fingerprints, Clyde."

Anderson went expertly about checking the girl's bow for prints. Bruce watched him with frowning interest.

"Wiped clean," Anderson declared, when he had completed his test. "We got the bow and the arrow. All we lack is the murderer."

"And the evidence," Bruce added.

"I'm going to question Crosby," Holm decided. "He's a sly old buzzard if there ever was one. Was supposed to have struck it rich prospecting, but he could've made his money bootleggin' during Prohibition. Almost caught him once." He bit off the end of a cigar. "I don't think he wanted to buy a mine. If he had he'd have approached Lorrell long ago."

Bruce remembered the key in his pocket. He was about to show it to Holm, then decided he wanted to ask a few questions before he turned it over.

"If you don't mind I'd like to question Miss Lorrell again," he said.

There was a hint of suspicion in Holm's eyes as he glanced at the sergeant, but he grinned.

"I want her to identify the arrow,

then you can have her," he told Bruce.

Claudia took one look at the arrow, identified it as hers, and turned away. She was pale and drawn when Bruce led her into the kitchen.

"Chin up," Bruce encouraged. "I don't particularly like cops grilling my—ah—fiancée. Would much rather do it myself. That's why I'm holding out on the chief."

He took the key from his pocket, held it out to her.

"Have you ever seen this before?"

Claudia took the key warily, looked at it, turned it over.

"It's brass, so it must be an old key. A trunk key, I think."

"The trunk would be old, too," Bruce prompted. "I found it on the floor in the den. Possibly you can tell me where the trunk is."

The girl glanced sharply at him, her dark, silky lashes lifting. A smile touched her lips.

"I do believe you are clever. The key was kept in Father's desk. The trunk is in the storeroom upstairs. It's Mother Lorrell's old trunk—one her father gave her. Father kept it as a keepsake. Some of her things are in it—things one keeps to remember someone by."

"You're referring to your father's first wife, I imagine?"

"Yes."

Bruce took the key from her hand. "She was part owner of the Bonanza Mine, wasn't she?"

"Yes. Her father and Mr. Lorrell's father discovered it. I mean the gold. Then they organized a mining company."

"Did she have any brothers, or sisters?"

CLAUDIA'S glance was wary.

"Are you digging up the family history?"

"I have the key," Bruce countered, grinning. "It might help. I'll repeat what you tell me only if necessary."

"Oh, it isn't that bad," she replied, giving him a wry smile. "And I don't mind. My Mother was the first Mrs. Lorrell's step-sister. There was a step-brother—my uncle. But he ran away from home when he was fifteen. He's never been heard of since. Mixed up, isn't it?"

"Somewhat," Bruce agreed, his eye-

lids dropping thoughtfully. "I suspected something of the sort. I suspect you inherited an interest in the mine."

"Yes, a fourth interest." Claudia caught her breath. "Do you think Parks knew, and was—" She bit her lip.

Bruce nodded. "I think he knew your family history better than you do. No doubt he wanted to marry your interest in the mine."

The girl's lips began to tighten. "I can't imagine how he found out."

"There are always ways, records," Bruce explained. "Let's talk of something more pleasant. Your foster-mother—Angeline Lorrell. What do you . . . Well, think of her?"

"She has been sweet to Tom and me."

"Know anything of her past?"

Claudia considered before she answered. "She was an actress. Had been married and divorced. Father met her when she was on location near the mine. That was before Mother—really my aunt—was killed. Angeline visited us several times, and—well—"

She left the rest to Bruce's imagination. He could well realize how Lorrell had been captivated by Angeline's charm and beauty, possibly even before his wife had met death. He frowned at a sudden thought, then dismissed it from his mind.

"Let's go see how the chief is coming with his grilling," he said. "I don't want to miss anything."

In the living room Holm was perspiring, but getting nowhere. He admitted as much.

"Someone in this room committed murder, and I intend to find out who!" he ground out.

Mrs. Lorrell, slumped on the davenport beside her husband, covered her face with her handkerchief. She moaned something, and Lorrell patted her hand soothingly.

"Must this go on all night, Andy?" he snapped to the chief. "Mrs. Lorrell is upset and has a headache."

"Gosh, it's after midnight," Tom Lorrell exclaimed, glancing at the clock on the mantel.

"Then it's past my bedtime," Crosby growled, backing up to the fire.

He had changed his wet suit for one several sizes too large for him, and looked more like a scarecrow than anything else.

"You think I did it," he said to Chief Holm, "so you might as well let the others go to bed."

Holm puffed viciously on his cigar for a moment.

"Sure," he said then. "Go to bed—all of you. But don't leave the house. I'll leave Anderson here to see that you don't."

The big detective's face fell. He didn't relish staying awake all night. Bruce grinned at him.

"I'll stay up with you, and help keep the fire going," he offered.

"Then it's to bed for me," Tom Lorrell said. "See you all in the morning."

Crosby followed him up the stairs. Lorrell and his wife followed a moment later. Claudia lingered, and spoke to Bruce.

"I'm sorry we haven't a spare room," she apologized. "But you can sleep on the davenport. I can bring you some blankets."

"Thanks." Bruce nodded. "But I'm not sleepy. Don't be alarmed if you hear prowlers. Any sounds will be made by Anderson or myself."

Claudia had started for the stairs, when Anderson said:

"Ain't you gonna kiss her good night? I'll turn my back."

WITH a wicked gleam sparkling in his eyes Bruce hastened to her to claim his rights.

"A man should always kiss his fiancée good night," he agreed.

Claudia glared daggers at him, then smiled, and tilted her lips for him to kiss. Her warm response sent a thrill racing down his spine. Then she ran upstairs.

When she had disappeared up the stairs, Bruce turned to the detective.

"As soon as they lock their doors," he said, "I'm going to prowl the store-room—for buried skeletons."

Anderson helped himself to an orange from a bowl on a table.

"Think there might be skeletons?" he drawled.

Bruce shrugged. "Never can tell. I wouldn't be surprised if Parks didn't have a past. He reminded me more of a gambler than a mining engineer."

"The chief's gonna check his past," the detective said. "That's why he left."

"And I think it's time to check the

storeroom," Bruce decided. "I hope the murderer stays behind a locked door."

He went up the stairs with the silent tread of a stalking cat. At the head of the stairs he paused and studied the doors opening off the hall. The door at the far end of the hall was open. It was a bathroom.

Light showed under four other doors. They would be the bedrooms to which the household had retired. The other door, little more than an arm's length away, must be to the storeroom.

A key was in the lock. Bruce unlocked the door, and opened it noiselessly. Darkness greeted him. He stepped through the door, closed it behind him. As a precaution he reversed the key and locked the door.

He switched on the flashlight Claudia had previously provided. The beam of light swept a room possibly ten feet square. It was unplastered, unceiled, and the flooring was warped with cracks between the boards. There were two windows. The pane was broken in one. A thick layer of dust and smudge covered everything.

Marks in the dust told him someone had preceded him. Parks, possibly, or the murderer.

The trunk, an antique, was beside the window with the broken pane. Tiptoeing to the window, he held the light on the trunk a moment. Disturbed dust suggested it had recently been opened.

A gust of wind-driven rain came through the broken pane. He glanced out. There was a porch beyond the window. He poked the beam of light through the window. Beyond the porch, some twenty feet away, the light showed the garage, a two-story building. The windows in the upper story indicated it had been intended for servants' quarters.

Bruce turned back to the trunk. As he did, he was surprised to see light reflected on the window in the adjoining wall. He stared at it a moment. The reflection had not been there a moment ago. Curious, he stepped to the window and glanced out. Instantly he discovered that the reflection came from a light in the den.

He bent closer, staring. He had an unobstructed view of the desk through the French doors and realized that he was staring at Anderson's broad back

as the detective bent over the desk to help himself to a cigar from a humidor. A man standing with his back to the door, and with that door open, or a man bending over the desk as Anderson was, made an excellent target from the window from which Bruce was looking.

BRUCE played his light around the window before which he stood, letting it come to rest on the sill. The thick layer of dust had been disturbed. Spots in the dust that could only have been made by rain blowing in told him the window had been opened not long before. Cautiously, he slid the window up. Then, dousing his light, he went down on his knees beside the window.

He was certain now that he knew how the murder had been committed. The murderer had simply opened this window, got down on his knees, and loosed the arrow across the ell. The position accounted for the angle of the arrow. He had been wrong in surmising the arrow had been loosed from a lower level.

Parks had no doubt been bending over the desk when murdered. That would account for what he had thought had been a level flight of the arrow.

Bruce reenacted the feat with an imaginary bow and arrow. By leaning against the wall and resting his imaginary bow on the sill, he drew back the arrow, aimed and let drive. The imaginary arrow sped across the hypotenuse of the right angle the house formed, through the door, and into Parks' back. Decidedly a simple feat for an expert archer.

A mirthless grin cracked Bruce's lips. No wonder there had been no telltale wet shoes, clothes. The murderer had simply to get the handiest bow and arrow, step into the storeroom, and commit the crime. Clever, but did the knowledge tell him anything? It didn't, unless—

But the murderer had been too clever to leave any clues. There was nothing but the marks in the dust. They told him nothing. But there *was* one thing. The murderer had had to come upstairs. Yet everyone in the house had been upstairs, unless it was Tom Lorrell.

Bruce was no better off than before. He swore under his breath as he realized he was worse off, because now he

had smeared his own fingerprints over the storeroom door and the window. He might be convicted of the crime himself. His return to the storeroom to search it *could* be construed as an act to cover up his fingerprints.

He could wipe them off, of course, but by doing so he might be aiding the murderer. He decided to leave his prints as they were. There was still the trunk. He went back to it. It was locked, but the brass key opened it.

What he expected to find, he didn't know. What he did find was that the trunk was filled with old photographs, trinkets, a scrap-book, and a few old clothes. Bruce dug to the bottom, even feeling about under the torn lining. He grunted as his fingers touched something tucked under the lining.

Pulling it out, he discovered it was a yellowed letter—addressed to Mrs. Kate Lorrell. The postmark was a date eleven years before.

He extracted the contents. A newspaper clipping dropped to the dust. He picked it up, glanced at it. The black headlines proclaimed that Rand and Kramer would feature the William Tell act at the circus that night.

Deciding he would read the clipping later, he tucked it in his pocket, and gave his attention to the letter. It was on a single sheet of paper, and was signed, "Martin Parkington."

He had started to read the letter when, with the suddenness of lightning, something zipped through the window, and tore into his coat. He fell back startled, knocking the flashlight off the edge of the trunk. But not before he saw the red feathered end of an arrow protruding from his coat!

CHAPTER VI BEYOND RECOVERY



FOR perhaps ten seconds Bruce Haiden stared at the arrow, his mouth gaping. Then his glance shifted to the window. A dull flash of lightning showed him the upper story of the garage.

One of the windows was open. The arrow that had come so close to finishing him had come from the open window. It had had to.

Shock quickly turned to anger. He

was not the man to let someone make a target of him. He could get that in the Army, if anywhere. Neither did he take time to reason why that someone wanted him dead. That would come later.

Cautiously he reached for the flashlight, dousing it. Then he yanked the arrow from his blouse. The letter went into the pocket with the clipping.

Approaching the window, he peered out hoping for another flash of lightning. There was none. Unfastening the window, he slid it open. No arrow greeted him. Disregarding the pelting rain, he eased through the window to the roof of the porch.

For half a minute he stood on the roof, staring through the rain at the garage. He could see little more than the silhouette of the building. The archer murderer could still be in the garage, or believing him disposed of, could have gone back into the house.

Anderson would know if anybody had left the house. But Bruce was determined to make sure of the garage.

The porch roof extended the width of the house. He moved along it, pausing to peer in the two bedroom windows. The rooms were dark. There was a tree extending above the roof at the far end of the porch. He picked his way cautiously toward it. Reaching the corner of the house, he peered around, and found himself staring at a square, lighted window. The bathroom window, no doubt. Another porch roof began at the window and extended to the front of the house. A ladder was leaning against the roof.

The ladder didn't help Bruce. There was a ten-foot gap between the roofs. He would have to make use of the tree. It was a walnut tree, and there was a limb within reaching distance. He reached out, caught hold of the limb, and slid from the roof.

The limb was as big as his arm. It groaned as the full force of his hundred-seventy pounds of brawn came down. Bending but not snapping, it let him down until his feet touched the ground. Turning loose, he trotted for the garage.

One of the big sliding doors was open. He paused, staring into blackness. If the murderer were still in the garage, he, Bruce, might step into the path of an arrow. He didn't think he would like that.

Standing to one side of the door, he reached the flashlight from his pocket. Holding it at arm's length, he snapped on the light.

Nothing happened. The beam of light picked out a heavy sedan, a work-bench, and a stairway. There was no one in the garage. He stepped through the door.

From the corner of his eye, he caught the faint outline of a figure crouching against the door just inside the garage, caught a glimpse of a bludgeon descending—but too late. He tried to dodge, to throw himself to one side. Pain flashed momentarily through his body, then nothing. . . .

HOW long he was unconscious, Bruce didn't know. When he opened his eyes he guessed it at a minute or two and let it go at that. His head felt the way a head must feel when a brick bounces off it. But he gritted his teeth, found his feet, and the light switch.

His attacker, of course, had vanished. So had the letter and the clipping, he discovered when he put a hand into his pocket. Anger made his blood race.

He discovered another light switch by the stairway, snapped it, and cautiously climbed to the second story. He found what he expected. Nothing. The window was still open, the rain was blowing in. He left it open, and went back into the house.

In the kitchen, he found the raincoat and rubbers he had worn, and left in the living room. Rubbers and coat were wet, proof that they had been discarded only moments before. He stared at them a moment, saw a piece of cloth protruding from one of the coat pockets. He reached down and removed it. It was a soggy handkerchief. He looked at it, then grunted, and shoved it into his pocket.

He stamped into the living room. Lewis Lorrell was sitting in the easy chair before the fireplace. Detective Anderson was just coming from the den. Both men stared at him.

"What'd you do—fall out of an upstairs window?" the detective asked, his mouth not quite closing from his surprise. "There's blood on your head, and you're all wet."

"I jumped out of a window," Bruce snapped, fire flashing in his gray eyes.

"After our archer murderer used me for a target. The blood is the result of a brick bounced off my head."

"The devil you say!" Anderson's square jaw jutted out. "I'll—"

"Hold it," Bruce interrupted, his eyes darting to Lorrell. "You were supposed to be in bed, Mr. Lorrell. Did you go outside? Your raincoat and rubbers are in the kitchen."

Lorrell's worried face tightened. "I decided I couldn't sleep, so I came downstairs. No one was here, so I stepped out on the front porch for a few minutes. I didn't use the raincoat, or the rubbers. I came in just a minute before you did."

"Did anyone see you on the porch?"

"Not unless Anderson did." Lorrell glanced at the detective.

Anderson looked sheepishly at his square-toed shoes.

"I was in the den looking around," he mumbled.

"With the door closed?"

Anderson nodded.

Bruce scowled. The murderer had undoubtedly seen him enter the store-room. Thwarted by a locked door and, fearing skeletons would be uncovered, the killer had gone downstairs, grabbed up raincoat and rubbers, and made for the garage. The return had been just as simple.

Bruce was about to tell Anderson what a good detective he was not, then let it ride. His anger was cooling, to be replaced by cold reasoning. Finding his handkerchief dry, he mopped his face thoughtfully.

Stepping to the fireplace, he stared into the crackling flames. Curled ashes which might once have been paper had blown to one side. Yes, there was a tiny bit of paper which had burned. Letter and clipping were beyond recovery. He whirled on Lorrell.

"What do you know about Rand and Kramer, the circus archery team?"

LORRELL gave a slight start, then forced a smile.

"You're over my head, son. I haven't been to a circus in twenty years. I'm certain I've never heard of the team."

"What about Rand and Kramer?" Anderson inquired, all interest.

"They did the William Tell act in a

circus years ago," Bruce explained, his eyes steady on Lorrell. "I found a clipping about them in an old trunk upstairs—in a letter addressed to Mrs. Kate Lorrell. I lost both letter and clipping when someone conked me when I went into the garage. After trying to dispose of me with an arrow."

Lorrell's face darkened. He scowled at Bruce.

"So you were searching for clues in the storeroom, I suppose." He tried to shrug it off. "I hope you found something. I want this business cleared up."

"I found one interesting fact that can't be burned," Bruce said, and explained how the murder had been committed. "The den protrudes out just far enough to make it easy to drive an arrow into a man standing in the light at the desk—through an open door. Do you know how that door happened to be open, Mr. Lorrell?"

Lorrell nodded. "Crosby opened it just after dinner. He thought it was stuffy in there."

"Now we're getting somewhere," Anderson beamed. "There may be fingerprints in the storeroom. It looks like—"

"Mine, at least," Bruce broke in, his eyes still on Lorrell. "The letter was addressed to your first wife, Mr. Lorrell, and was signed by a Martin Parkington. Did you know him?"

"He was Mrs. Lorrell's first husband," Lorrell explained, scowling at the fire. "I am speaking of Angeline, my present wife," he added. "She and Parkington were divorced some time before I met her. I've never seen or met the man. And I've never seen the letter. Its presence in the trunk is a surprise to me. I was unaware my first wife knew him."

Bruce let it go at that. Rand and Kramer or Parkington might have something to do with the murder. Then again they might not. But he knew how to find out. Especially about Rand and Kramer.

"It probably has nothing to do with the case," he said, and turned to Anderson. "I doubt if you'll find any prints in the storeroom, but the garage might have some. On the stair railing. I noticed it was piping. Suppose we have a look."

Anderson was willing. In the kitchen, Bruce paused.

"You go ahead. I want to phone your

chief. If he doesn't have anything on that archery team, he can get the information from the newspaper files."

Anderson was beaming. "You think they could be involved? That Parkington, too?"

"In a murder you run down every clue, and aren't surprised at anything."

"Crosby could be most anybody—say one of those archers," Anderson declared, rubbing his chin. "And him losin' his gun. And openin' that door."

He went outside.

Bruce picked up the extension phone, dialed the operator, and asked for the police. Holm answered the phone after several rings. He sounded sleepy, but when Bruce explained who he was he seemed to wake up. Bruce was starting to explain what he wanted when the phone went dead.

AS SOON as he was sure the telephone was dead, Bruce ran into the living room. Lorrell was standing in the open doorway of the den.

"Will there be any objection if I go into the den, Sergeant?" he asked mildly.

Bruce frowned, then shrugged.

"How are the phones connected up?" he asked.

"Both are on the same wire. Why?"

"Just curious," Bruce said. "I don't think there'll be any objections about you going into the den."

Bruce stood frowning at the door as it closed behind Lorrell. The murderer had tampered with the telephone wires again. Was it in the basement? At the thought, he started for the basement.

He paused in the kitchen, wondering if he should call Anderson, then decided against it. He switched on the light, and went down the stairs. His spine crawled as he realized the murderer could have taken refuge in the basement. But he saw nothing suspicious.

The wires, he found, were intact, so the trouble was not in the cellar. He found a bench and, placing it before the window the wires came through, stepped up on it. Unlatching the window, he reached out and felt about for the wires. He found them—lying beside the house. Pulling them in, he realized they had been cut where they had been fastened to the house.

He tried to recall the exact spot they were fastened to the house. Then he muttered a curse. They had been within arm's reach of a window. The side window in the storeroom. Whoever had cut them had merely to step into the storeroom, open the window, reach out and clip them. It could have been Lorrrell, or anybody upstairs.

CHAPTER VII

VANISHING GUN



ALIGHT step on the stairs whirled Bruce around. Claudia was staring down at him.

"Father said you'd gone to the garage," she said, coming on down the stairs. She was pale, plainly frightened. "I saw the door open and thought you might be down here."

Bruce frowned at her, but said nothing.

"I want you to leave," she went on, glancing over her shoulder, "before something happens to you. I overheard you say the murderer had tried to kill you. I'd never forgive myself if—if anything happened to you."

Bruce grinned. He was afraid he was going to fall in love with this girl. Everything was against it, but . . . He shrugged.

"I intend to see you through," he said firmly. "Besides, I can't very well leave now. It'd be the same as confessing to murder."

"But no one knows your real name!" she protested.

He grinned at her. "The police do. I told them."

"I should have guessed you would," she said, and tried to smile.

Bruce suddenly had an overwhelming desire to take Claudia in his arms and hold her protectively. But it was neither the time, nor the place for that. After all, *she* could be the murderer. He had to prove she was not, before his leave was up.

"You must have been standing at the head of the stairs to overhear us in the living room," he said. "Did you see anybody go into the storeroom?"

"No," she said. "I was on the landing, but surely would have heard anyone. Why?"

"Someone cut the phone wires while I was phoning," he said bluntly.

"But I thought—" She didn't finish, just stared at him.

"I found the trouble in the first place and repaired it," he explained, smiling wryly. "In fact, I phoned the police from the kitchen. Less than five minutes ago the wires were cut again, while I was talking to Holm. Say!"

His mouth stayed open. The thought that struck him had been that sudden. The storeroom had been locked, and the key was on the inside. He had left by the window. If the wires had been cut from the storeroom window, whoever had done it had had to enter by the window he had left open! And from the porch roof.

"Why, what's the matter?" Claudia was staring at him.

Bruce's mouth snapped shut. "Who occupies the two bedrooms on the east side of the hall?"

"One is the spare room," she told him. "Crosby has it. The other one is mine. You were in it—you saw it."

Bruce snapped his fingers. "You're right. It was just a wild thought. Forget it. I'm all mixed up."

Color touched the girl's cheeks.

"I don't blame you for thinking I—could have cut the wires," she said in a low voice. "But I didn't. When you started for the garage, I came down and started to follow you, then decided I was being a little foolish, and— Well, I stepped into the bathroom downstairs."

Bruce looked over the arrows on the table while he thought that over. He had to admit she must be telling the truth. She could be a superb actress, yet she had been surprised when he told her about repairing the telephone wires. He wanted to believe her.

"Did you know about the letter in the trunk?" he asked her.

Claudia shook her head. "I don't see how I missed it. I've gone through the trunk several times. That letter is as much of a mystery to me as it is to Father."

"It was hidden under the lining," Bruce divulged. Then he asked abruptly, "Did you ever hear of the archery team of Rand and Kramer in vaudeville?"

"No." Claudia's eyes widened as she

asked: "Do you think the letter has anything to do with—this?"

Bruce shrugged. "That remains to be seen."

AN IDEA began buzzing around in his head as he looked at the girl speculatively. Because he believed her innocent, he decided to trust her.

"Do you think you could walk to that neighbor, and phone Chief Holm for me?" He studied her expression as he made the query. "It's a lot to ask, but—"

She smiled up at him. "If you trust me, I certainly can. And it isn't a lot to ask of your—ah—fiancée."

Bruce smiled back at her. "I'll see you off."

He told her the message he wanted relayed to Holm as they went up the stairs. Claudia looked questioningly at him once, but asked no questions. Five minutes later Bruce let her out the back door. He waited on the stoop until she disappeared down the driveway.

Lighting a cigarette, he smoked it thoughtfully, mulling over the information he had, trying to arrange it in his mind. If he could only—

The single shot that reverberated through the house was like a clap of thunder. Bruce jumped at the sound, jarred out of his thoughts. His cigarette butt dropped to the stoop.

For a moment he stood stock-still, startled. Then he whirled, yanked open the door and raced into the house, heading grimly for the source of the shot, expecting anything.

There was no one in the living room, but the door to the den was ajar. He leaped across the room, shoved the door open. And stared with dilated eyes at what he saw.

Lewis Lorrell was lying face down on the floor. Blood was oozing from his breast, saturating his shirt and coat, and trickling down on to the carpet. A revolver was lying beside his outstretched hand.

One glance told Bruce that Lorrell was dead.

Bruce Haiden had no more than taken in the gruesome sight than it seemed to him that everybody in the house rushed into the den at the same time. He was still staring at the body when Anderson pounded into the room.

As if the detective's entrance had been a signal, Mrs. Lorrell, Tom, and Crosby came running down the stairs. Angeline Lorrell was wearing a wine-colored robe which shone like satin. Tom was in his pajamas. But Crosby was still wearing the oversized suit.

"Wasn't that a shot?" Mrs. Lorrell asked, wringing her hands, and wrecking a white handkerchief she held.

"I hope it ain't another murder," Crosby complained.

"It could be suicide," Bruce said, trying to watch them all at the same time.

"Who—"

Mrs. Lorrell had walked to the den as she spoke. And at what she saw she screamed, and promptly fainted. Bruce caught her, carried her to a couch in the living room, and laid her down. He stared down at her face a moment, then reached down and lifted one eyelid. Straightening, he turned to look at the others.

Tom Lorrell had taken one look and turned away, his face white, grim. Crosby, too, looked grim. His eyes seemed to linger on the gun.

"Where's the girl?" Anderson demanded, looking about. His eyes returned to Bruce, rested suspiciously on him.

"I sent her on an errand," Bruce explained.

"Oh, you did, huh?" The detective considered. "I'll phone the chief."

"Not from any phone here, you won't," Bruce said. "The wires are cut. That's why I sent Miss Lorrell on an errand. I wouldn't be surprised if the chief didn't show up shortly."

Anderson chewed at his lower lip, then picked up the phone. Bruce grinned crookedly.

CROSBY was still looking through the door, his lips tightly compressed. Bruce touched his arm, and asked softly:

"Have you a record of the serial number on your gun, Mr. Crosby?"

Crosby glared at him. "No. Never figured anybody'd steal it off me. Why?"

"Guns are traced by their serial numbers," Bruce explained. "If that's your gun—"

Crosby scowled, and strode to the living room fireplace. There was a hint of fear in his eyes.

Deciding it would be useless to ask questions, Bruce went back into the den. He took a position just within the room where he could watch those in the living room.

"I think you got some explaining to do, Sergeant," Anderson said, scowling. "You couldn't've got me out of the house and done this."

Bruce shrugged wearily. He had thought better of Anderson. Now he was proving to be nothing but a cigar smoking detective after all, without too much intelligence, or imagination. But he told the man everything that had happened, as far as he knew.

"Did you find any prints in the garage?" he asked.

Anderson shook his head. "The pipe railing had been wiped clean. Someone is plenty clever, or has read too many detective stories. But it's a gun this time—and that's different."

"And looks like suicide," Bruce added.

Anderson stared at him a moment, then looked down at the body. He had started to speak when the outer door slammed and in a moment Chief Holm stamped in. His lean face was flushed; fire burned in his black eyes.

"When the phone went dead while you were talking to me," he said to Bruce Haiden hurriedly, "I figured something had happened, and rushed right out." He darted a quick glance about the room, then looked down at the body. "So, it's Lorrell this time. What do you make of it, Sergeant?"

Bruce stepped to the desk, picked up a sheet of letterhead stationery, and read the penned words on it. Silently, he handed it to Holm. It read:

I, Lewis Lorrell, hereby confess that I killed Marvin Parks. He was blackmailing me and I had no choice but to kill him, or face ruin, disgrace.

Lewis Lorrell.

Holm studied the confession for a long moment, his face grim, stony, expressionless. Folding the sheet of paper, he put it in his pocket.

"Looks like he took the easy way out," he commented, glancing at Bruce. "I take it you uncovered some evidence, something that would've exposed him."

Bruce didn't answer immediately. He was on his knees beside the body, studying it, the position of the gun. Rolling

the body to its side, careless of what the medical examiner or coroner might say, he studied the entry of the bullet. Nodding then, he stood up.

"Was Lorrell left-handed?" he asked.

Holm started. "No, he said, and added quickly, 'I see what you mean! The gun is closest to his left hand. He was probably standing when he pulled the trigger. The gun just happened to be nearest his left hand when he fell.'"

Bruce shook his head. "If he had shot himself there would be powder burns. There are none. And I'll wager there are no prints on the gun."

"Huh" Anderson grunted. "We'll soon find out about that."

WHILE Anderson checked the gun for fingerprints, Bruce told Holm of the attack on himself, the letter, and the clipping.

"It looks to me like the murderer was planning a perfect out for himself," he summed up. "Once this confession was found the investigation would be ended."

Holm nodded soberly. "If that's the case, how come Lorrell wrote that confession? I'll wager it's his handwriting."

Bruce shrugged. "One guess is as good as another. He may have planned to commit suicide to save someone he loved, or it may be a clever forgery. Then again he may have written the confession at the point of a gun. I would say he wrote it to prolong his life, hoping against hope that something would happen to save him."

"Gun's wiped clean," Anderson announced, staring at Bruce with suspicion. "You're either an almighty clever detective, or—"

"Or the murderer," Bruce finished, with a tight smile. He lowered his voice. "I have an idea who the murderer is and no uniform is involved."

"Who?" came in unison from Holm and Anderson.

Bruce continued to smile tightly. He weighed the facts carefully before he answered. He could be wrong, but didn't believe he was.

"I said I had only an idea," he confessed. "I prefer not to mention names just yet. It's always better to let a murderer convict himself. They'll do it if given the proper incentive. If you would care to cooperate with me a little

longer, let me run the show—" He let his voice trail off.

Holm stared at him hard. Anderson scowled, and left the decision up to his chief.

"I checked with your agency in Denver," Holm said, presently. "They gave you a clean bill of health, and were willing to bet money you could bust the case if anybody could. I want only the murderer. What's your show?"

Bruce let his breath out slowly. He hadn't expected Holm to give him his way. Mentally he thanked his former boss.

"I suggest one of you go to the neighbor across the highway," he said. "You should find Miss Lorrell there. I still want the information I sent her after. Get it if you can, then bring the girl back."

"You go, Clyde." Holm nodded to the detective. "And phone the coroner to come out again."

Anderson grunted, and left the room.

"You and I will have another look in the basement," Bruce said. "We'll leave the door unlocked."

Mrs. Lorrell was conscious and sobbing, her head buried in cupped hands. Crosby was staring at the fire, but watchful, hands in pockets. Tom Lorrell was standing spread-legged in the middle of the room. Shock had passed, and a hint that he meant to seek vengeance was in his eyes.

"Where's Claudia?" he demanded.

"Gone to your neighbor's to telephone," Bruce explained. "Anderson has gone after her." He paused, then added. "We're not going to ask any questions until after the coroner arrives. It might be better if you all went to your rooms. Mr. Lorrell, will you take your mother to her room? Better stay with her."

Mrs. Lorrell lifted her head, courageously. "Oh, I can manage," she said wearily.

"I think it would be better if Tom stayed with you until Claudia returns," Bruce insisted, sympathetically. "She'll be back in a few minutes."

"Come on, Mother, I'll stay with you."

Tom went to his stepmother, gave her his arm. "It will be best—with a murderer loose."

When they disappeared upstairs, Bruce said to Chief Holm:

"I found something in the basement I want you to see. I think it will lead to the motive."

HE LED the way to the kitchen, ignoring Crosby. Holm followed, mystified. Bruce slammed two doors, then stopped. He motioned Holm to silence when the chief would have spoken.

Bruce counted to a hundred, then nodded to Holm, and stepped back into the living room. Crosby was still standing there, staring at the flames. Giving him barely a glance, Bruce continued on to the den, with the chief at his heels. He opened the door.

Holm stared, then swore.

"The gun's gone!" he exploded. "What kind of a stunt is this?"

Bruce smiled wryly, and took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He lighted a smoke before he spoke.

"I expected it to be," he said then dryly. "It was wiped clean of prints, but there was one oversight. The serial number. Mr. Crosby realized it could be traced to him, and simply hid it. I imagine he'll tell us where it is."

Crosby had whirled around, and was staring with jaw hanging slack. Holm strode to him.

"All right, Crosby," he snapped. "You can begin talkin'. I figured you had a hand in this business. Where's the gun?"

Crosby swallowed four times before he found his voice.

"I don't know what you're talkin' about," he said nervously. "I told you my gun was stolen when I was knocked out. I ain't seen it since."

"You saw it lyin' on the floor by the body!" Holm thundered. "You fixed yourself up an alibi, but you got scared about the gun. We know you've got it. You were the only one left in the room here. Talk, or I'll—"

Crosby had recovered from his shock at being accused. He straightened, glared at Holm, his lower lip jutting out.

"I've talked too much already," he snapped. "I'll do my talkin' to a lawyer."

He turned back to face the fire, but not before he had darted a glance across the room.

"I thought you'd show us where you hid the gun," Bruce said, and walked to

the flower vase at which Crosby had glanced. "It's a big vase and will hold a revolver nicely."

Crosby's lower lip trembled, but he didn't lose his composure.

"You're a clever boy, Sergeant. It's my gun, 'course, but you'll have to prove I killed anybody with it."

Chief Holm reached for his handcuffs.

"You can talk now, or at the station," he announced sternly. "Stick out your paws."

Crosby held out his hands, but at that moment Mrs. Lorrell swept down the stairs, across the room, and confronted him. Her tears were gone, leaving her face with a hard, vengeful expression.

"So you are the murderer!" she accused Crosby in a shrill, contemptuous voice. "You located the Bonanza's lost vein, and hired Parks to buy it, knowing my husband would never sell to you. Parks was going to sell you out, so you murdered him! You were afraid Lewis suspected you, so you murdered *him*! I'll see that you hang!"

Frank Crosby turned his back to her. "Are you ready, Andy?" he asked Detective Anderson coolly.

CHAPTER VIII

STRATEGY



HEN Anderson escorted Claudia in, Bruce met her at the door. Her face was pale, drawn, haggard, but her chin was up and her shoulders were square.

"I had to tell her," Anderson said, and strode on into the room.

The girl forced a wan smile. "I couldn't get Captain Holm," she said, "so I phoned Dr. Weston, the coroner. He promised to get the information you wanted and bring it out."

Bruce gripped her shoulder. "You're a soldier, Miss Lorrell. None braver." "Thank you!"

Bruce watched her cross the room to where her stepmother and brother sat on the davenport. His eyes were shadowed, his shoulders sagged. Then he remembered it was she who had got him into the mess, and his shoulders straightened.

He was thinking that the remainder

of his leave was not going to be as he had planned it, when the door burst open, and the coroner came in. He was grinning.

"You've certainly put our town on the map, Sergeant," he greeted. "Two murders in one night. Ah, I see the culprit has been caught. Fast work, I'll say."

"Did you get the information on Rand and Kramer?" Bruce asked.

"My wife did. She's the local correspondent for *The Times*."

The coroner unfastened his slicker, and fumbled in a pocket. "Haven't had time to read it, but I doubt if it will do you any good now."

"It may corroborate the evidence," Bruce said, as he accepted the envelope.

With his back to the occupants of the room, he extracted the single sheet of paper from the unsealed envelope. His lips tightened as he read the typewritten report. He read it over a second time, then folded it, and replaced it in the envelope. The envelope went into his pocket.

Holm caught his eye as he turned about.

"I guess the case is busted," he remarked. "Crosby will talk, or I'll know the reason why. You're free to go—do whatever you were about."

"Thanks, Chief." Bruce glanced about the room. "But I think I'll stay and hear what the coroner has to say. I've gone this far, so I might as well stay for the finish. We might as well go into the den. The Lorrells have suffered enough without having to keep looking at Crosby."

"That's an idea," Anderson spoke up. "Lookin' at his victim might make him remorseful enough to talk."

He shoved the apish little man toward the den. Bruce and Holm followed. They found the coroner already busy over the body. Bruce closed the door, then bent down, and place his eye to the keyhole.

"Now what the devil are you up to?" Holm demanded. "Think you'll see something you shouldn't."

"It's a habit I got into when I was a detective," Bruce said. "If my calculations are right I should see the fireplace. . . . Yes, I can. If the rest of my deductions are correct . . . They are. Come on."

HE YANKED the door open and leaped through it running. A scream of surprise and terror greeted his entrance. Mrs. Lorrell whirled about at the fireplace, a folded sheet of paper in her hand.

For one brief instant she stared at the grimly charging sergeant, her eyes bright with terror. Then she flung the paper toward the fire.

"No, you don't!" Bruce cried, flinging himself across the room.

Angeline Lorrell tried desperately to stop him, but he knocked her aside with a sweep of his arm. The other arm shot into the flames, his hand snatching the paper a split instant after it reached the fire.

Flames were eating at the corners of the paper as he snatched it out. He

"A matter of strategy," Bruce explained. "If my deductions are correct, Crosby is Claudia's long lost uncle, and was here merely to protect her interest in the mine. Am I right, Mr. Crosby?"

Crosby nodded. "Reckon I should have told you right off, but heck—" He let it go at that.

Bruce stepped to the floor lamp and read the scorched paper. His face was grim, stony when he turned and faced Angeline Lorrell.

"You are a clever murderess," he accused, "and did a remarkable job of creating confusion and false leads. Parks had no doubt told you he had hidden this document somewhere in the house." He tapped the scorched paper. "To doom you if anything happened to him. You had to have time to find it.



***"You Know Something About This Murder!
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COMING NEXT ISSUE

slapped it against his leg, putting out the flames.

"Give it to me!" Mrs. Lorrell screamed.

She was suddenly a frantic, hysterical wildcat. Her eyes were stark mad. She clawed and struck at Bruce, tried to wrest the paper from him, to fling it back into the fire.

"Grab her!" Bruce shouted, as Holm and Anderson rushed into the room, mystified but ready for anything. "She's the killer!"

Holm caught and held the woman in a grip of steel. Bruce stepped beyond her clutching hands. Tom and Claudia stood on the stairs, too stunned to speak.

Anderson was the first to find his voice.

"What in thunder is this all about?" he demanded. "I thought Crosby was the killer. Now—it's her!"

When Crosby started for the police, you left the house by the bathroom window upstairs, climbed down a ladder, smacked him down and took his gun, hoping to divert suspicion to him and give you more time.

"Later when I went to search the store-room you realized Parks could have hidden it there. I locked the door behind me, so you ran downstairs, got a bow and arrow from the basement just in case—and went to the garage. From the garage window you watched me search the trunk. When I found the letter and clipping you were afraid I'd found the document.

"I made a poor target in the uncertain light and you failed to kill me, so you waited and conked me, got the letter and clipping and burned them. Only to discover I'd read enough to maybe give me a lead. You still had to have time to

find *this* document, so you cut the phone wires, entering the storeroom by way of Claudia's room and the porch roof."

"Wait a minute!" Anderson broke in. "What about that letter and clipping you're talking about?"

"The clipping," Bruce explained, "was the means of tracing her from Angeline Rand, archer of the William Tell circus act, to Angeline Parkington—Mrs. Martin Parkington."

"Angeline Parkington, huh?" Holm glowered at the woman. "According to my information Marvin Parks was an alias for Martin Parkington. He used to run a gambling house in Los Angeles—till he got run out and disappeared. So he was her first husband, huh? But tell us the rest."

"It's a sordid story," Bruce went on, tossing the trunk key to Holm. "That's the key to the case. Parks had taken it from the desk for some reason, and had it in his hand when he was murdered."

HE FACED Angeline Lorrell.

"Parkington was a mining engineer when you quit the circus to marry him—for his money. After you got his money, you divorced him to go into the movies, changing your name to West. You soon realized it was a long grind to stardom and money, so you began looking around for another man with money. You met Lewis Lorrell. He was just the man, only he was married. But you weren't letting a wife stand in your way.

"I think Kate Lorrell suspected what you were up to and wrote to Parkington to check up on you. That doesn't matter now. What does matter is that you followed Kate Lorrell to a lonely stretch of mountain road and crowded her over a cliff."

"That's a lie!" Mrs. Lorrell shrieked defiantly. "I haven't killed anyone. You can't prove a thing."

"I have this sworn document to prove you did," Bruce reminded her, again tapping the scorched paper. "Parks, or Parkington, was a witness to that supposed auto accident. You wrecked his life. He thought to make you suffer by holding murder over your head. I imagine he was also blackmailing you."

"That might account for Lorrell's dwindling fortune," Holm said. "Go on, Sergeant."

"Then Parks discovered the lost Bonanza vein. He realized it was his big chance to regain his fortune, to humiliate you. He determined to get the mine one way or another. He tried to marry Claudia for her interest, and to buy Lorrell's. It's reasonable to assume that, before you'd permit him to expose you as a murderess, you'd use pressure to persuade Lorrell to sell, and Claudia to marry him.

"But Lorrell balked—and Claudia found an out. You knew Parks was gambler enough to go through with his scheme. If he did you were finished. You had to kill him to save your neck.

"I think Lorrell was beginning to suspect you. But you were willing to sacrifice anybody so long as you weren't exposed. When he went into the den, you followed him in, and discovered he'd found the affidavit Parks had stuck in the dictionary where it would be found sooner or later if anything happened to him. You saw your doom, unless you murdered again.

"You saw a chance for an out. You had Crosby's gun and gave Lorrell the choice of writing a confession, or dying. He wrote the confession to stall for time, hoping something would happen to stop you. Nothing did. The moment he signed his name you shot him.

"But you bungled your out. You wiped your prints off the gun. Desperation made you forget the gun needed Lorrell's prints to make it suicide. You didn't think beyond the affidavit. You grabbed it and raced up to your room, thinking it would be easy to dispose of later on."

BRUCE gave her a wicked grin. "You made another mistake when you faked a faint on seeing your dead husband. Persons turn pale when they faint. You didn't. Neither does an unconscious person's eyelids jerk when lifted, nor does the eyeball move."

A grim silence followed. Chief Holm used it to read the affidavit Bruce handed him, along with the report on Rand and Kramer.

"It's motive enough to convict her," he said, chewing viciously on a new toothpick. "But how'd you know about it?" He glanced at Bruce.

Bruce shrugged. "I didn't. But when Parks was murdered I saw a paper"

stuck in the dictionary. It was missing when I found Lorrell dead. I suspected the murderer had taken it. In fact, had murdered for it. That's why I staged the act with Crosby—to throw her off. Since she had burned the letter and clipping, I figured she'd attempt to burn the affidavit. You saw her try it."

CHIEF HOLM nodded.

"But you haven't told us how you come to suspect her in the first place," he reminded.

"Oh, I almost forgot it," Bruce said, and took the handkerchief he had found in the raincoat from his pocket. "This is it. A pink handkerchief with an A embroidered in the corner. Mrs. Lorrell was kind enough to drop it for me to pick up when we met here this—ah—last evening. I got a good look at it. When I found it in the raincoat pocket, I was fairly sure she was guilty, especially when I found the tiny bit of feather stuck in it. That bit of feather came from the feather on the murder

arrow, and explains why her prints weren't on the arrow."

Holm took the handkerchief.

"Put the bracelets on her, Clyde," he said. . . .

It was another day. Angeline Lorrell had confessed. The storm had passed and the sun was shining bright and warm. Sergeant Bruce Haiden still had his hundred dollars, eighteen hours of his leave, a girl, her car, and a tank of gas.

"Where'll we go?" Claudia asked.

Bruce saw a city ahead. He grinned.

"There should be a jewelry store in the next town," he said. "The dinner and dance have been agreed upon. But first, I think I'd like to invest part of my money in a diamond ring for my fiancée. The war's going to end some day, and I'd like to have somebody to come back to. Think we could agree on that?"

"I'm sure we could, darling," Claudia said, but it was mumbled as he kissed her.

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The guns of the postal
officials were turned
on the thief

Postscript to Murder

By AMY PASSMORE HURT

*A million dollar mail pouch is pretty good bait for a
clever crook who plans the perfect railway robbery!*

THE man carrying the shiny black suitcase did not hear the panther feet of the slouched figure trailing behind him. He might otherwise have hesitated before entering that tunnel-like thoroughfare where low, overhanging branches of cottonwoods made a canopy above the narrow, poorly-lighted street.

What happened there in the dark, in the little mountain valley town on a

warm summer night, took less than a minute. There was the sound of a blow, a groan, and then the dull thud of a body as it hit the sidewalk. A moment later the attacker, suitcase in hand, emerged from the darkness and turned uptown, toward that section of Raton where second-rate hotels were to be found.

Mike Loder locked the door of his cheap room and dumped the contents

of his victim's suitcase on the bed. Eagerly he went through the heap of articles, his brown eyes snapped when he saw what he needed most—a long slim key.

It was attached with another key to a heavy brass chain and it bore the stamp, "U. S. Thro. Reg'd Mail." This key and the commission which he had taken from the coat pocket of Inspector Heflin, who was the man he had just murdered, were all that were necessary to make the biggest haul of his career. That haul would include almost a million dollars in one-thousand and ten-thousand dollar bills.

Perfunctorily, Mike went through the other articles from the suitcase. Underwear, shirts, handkerchiefs, socks, and a pair of cotton pajamas. Cotton pajamas! Mike smiled. He had worn nothing next to his skin but silk since he had pulled the Upjohn bank job back in New York, some six months ago. That money was all spent now, but he had acquired a taste for luxury that would not be denied.

He cast the clothing aside and picked up a little shaving kit, worn shabby. He could use the electric razor that lay within, he decided. It was a good one and almost new. The kit he threw in the waste basket. It was followed by several photographs, presumably Heflin's wife and daughters, and a small box containing digestive pills, a package of medicated cigarettes, an atomizer, and a roll of bandage.

MIKE LODER now smiled again. Heflin must have been a regular old woman, doctoring every little pain.

He opened a flap at one end of the suitcase. Within the pocket lay a Bible and a little paper-bound booklet entitled, "Daily Readings." So—Heflin had been that kind of a guy! Neurotic and religious. Mike cast the two little books in on top of the kit, along with the other articles.

The clothing, with the exception of the pajamas, which he substituted with his own silk ones, he repacked in the suitcase. He put the commission in the inner coat pocket of the suit he had purchased that afternoon and attached the brass chain with the keys to the trousers belt. The folder of papers that had been with the commission he

placed in a new, business-like-looking briefcase.

Mike Loder looked at himself in the mirror and liked what he saw. He would, he told himself, defy the Inspector's own mother to tell them apart, for he looked enough like the dead man to be his twin. Even to the red wavy hair.

Diet had removed twenty pounds of excess weight and had made his figure almost exactly like that of the Inspector's. An extra lift to the heels of his shoes, a cap made to cover the gap in his upper front teeth had also aided materially. Artistic to the last degree, Mike had even plucked his eyebrows, to more closely resemble the sparse, narrow brows that characterized Heflin's face.

Of course, Mike reminded himself, he wouldn't dare spend very much time in the company of anyone who had known Heflin really well. There were bound to be differences in speech as well as mannerisms that might betray him to the wary. He had spent weeks eating at the same table with Heflin, at the boarding house in Kansas City, observing his intended victim. Mike had worn a disguise then, for it wouldn't do later for the boarders or the Inspector's wife to remember the similarity between the two men.

Mike Loder had been equally as careful in his other preparations to assume the role of Inspector Heflin. For months he had been coached by Joe Crumbley, his pal and a former mail clerk. After twenty years in the mail service, Joe had quit to take a position in the Federal Reserve Bank in Washington, D. C.

Some latent streak of dishonesty had cropped out there, for Joe had not been able to withstand the temptations he was subjected to. He soon began to figure out ways to obtain easy wealth. As an employee of the bank, he had had ample opportunity to secure information. That information had been passed on to Mike Loder when the time was ripe.

Mike felt confident that he was letter perfect now, thanks to Joe's expert coaching. Besides, he had been observing many of the Post Office employees. Average men, most of them. Honest, loyal, but dumb. Dumber than anything. Else they wouldn't be so loyal—or so honest. Not with millions of

dollars passing through their hands, year after year.

Mike waited at the neat little station until No. 9 rolled to a full stop. Boarding the mail car, he was met at the open door by a thin, stooped, middle-aged man.

Now!

"You're clerk Gunther, aren't you?"

Mike asked easily, setting the shiny black suitcase down and laying the briefcase on top of it.

"Yes . . ." The clerk waited for the other to present his credentials. "Clerk-in-charge, Gunther."

Reaching for the commission, Mike saw the clerk's hand relax on the butt of the pistol that hung at his right hip.

"Oh—I'm sorry, sir! I remember you, now. The light's poor tonight." Gunther extended his hand. "You're Inspector Heflin!"

SO FAR, so good, thought Mike to himself.

"That's right." Mike shook the other's hand. "I'm looking for a certain registered letter, a marked letter. Been some pilfering along the line east of here."

The clerk-in-charge nodded. "We'll be glad to assist."

Mike uttered an inward sigh of relief. He glanced down the car from beneath his plucked brows. There were only two helpers aboard. A crew of three. Just what he had expected. This was going to be easy, he told himself. But his satisfaction was short-lived, for just then two more men, valises in hand, swung aboard. They were followed by a third man, red of face and puffing.

"You have a crew of six, I see," Mike commented. "I thought . . ."

"New order, Inspector. We pick up three men here now. Mail's getting awfully heavy along the line, what with all the new air-bases they've established from here on to the Coast." Gunther turned to a tall, raw-boned young man who was poking letters in a case.

"Webb, show Inspector Heflin where the registered pouches are."

"Yes, sir. This way, Inspector."

The train started with a jerk and it was with difficulty that Mike followed the young clerk back to the stalls where the registered mail was piled.

"I'm looking for a pouch from Washington, D. C., going direct to Los

Angeles," Mike said, and was dismayed to see Webb point to a heap of pouches that numbered fifty or more. He had to find the right pouch before the train reached Alton. Time was the all-important factor.

While he had removed every scrap of paper and the other contents of the pockets of the dead man, it would be only a matter of hours before they discovered Heflin's body and took his fingerprints. Eyeing the formidable pile of sacks, he felt his hands grow moist.

"You run along, Webb," Mike said to the hovering clerk. There was little chance to single out the right pouch with that eagle-eyed youngster looking on. "Thanks a lot."

"Thank you, sir. Call me if you need help."

From his hip pocket Mike pulled the safety chain with the short "L.A." key and the long, slim, registered key. He opened the lock of the pouch on top of the pile. It contained a hodge-podge of registered letters, small packages, and manila envelopes.

Sack after sack he examined, scrutinizing the bags for ripped and re-sewed seams, for he had to make a pretense of looking for a pouch that had been pilfered. And for the same reason he had to examine packets of letters, when all he was interested in was a pouch containing precious greenbacks, sent by the Federal Reserve Bank at Washington, D. C., to the Federal Reserve Bank, Los Angeles.

This pretended search for a marked letter took time, more time than he had counted on. If only, he thought, that silly clerk-in-charge didn't delay him so, changing the lock numbers of every pouch he, Mike, opened and making notations on the accompanying bills. But it was routine procedure and he dared not protest.

"Any luck?" asked young Webb, pausing on his way to the storage car.

"Not yet." Mike tried to keep the impatience from his voice. It wouldn't do for Webb to suspect that the search held any great importance for Mike personally.

The pouch of bills had to be here, he told himself. It had to be. Joe had wired that it would be on this train. Joe knew. He was too eager for his own share of the swag to risk any slip-up. In fact,

Joe was already on his way by plane to Mexico City, where Mike would join him soon. Mike went through the pouches with renewed confidence until he reached the last one. He picked it up, opened it. There were no packages of currency within. Only registered letters.

DIZZILY, the whole car seemed to spin around.

Mike sat down abruptly on the stool beside him. Sudden nausea knotted his vitals. Gunther methodically changed the number on the pouch and then drew a glass of water for Mike.

"Some fellows never get over train sickness," the clerk-in-charge said by way of comfort.

Mike uttered something about drinking too much coffee when he had an upset stomach, but he drank the water, grateful for the shock its iciness gave him. He mustn't, he reflected, give way to panic. He and Joe had planned this thing too carefully. He had just overlooked a pouch somewhere.

That had to be it.

Above the glass' rim his eyes bulged suddenly. Lying there, partly covered by some local registered pouches, was another pouch, another direct from Washington to Los Angeles. No wonder he hadn't seen it!

His nausea passed magically. He slid from the stool and bent over the sack, inserting the registered key with trembling fingers. Within lay the precious greenbacks!

Suppressing his excitement, he sat down on the stool again while Gunther went through the usual routine of changing the pouch's numbers. Mike's eyes glittered as he envisioned the wealth that lay there on the floor beside him. Scanty as were the contents of the pouch, it contained almost a million dollars! Why, it hardly seemed possible. The whole sack would fit nicely in the suitcase.

He looked at Gunther. Gunther was using his handkerchief, as unconcerned as though the pouch contained nothing more than so many butter coupons.

"That's the last sack, Inspector. Wrong tip-off on the letter, I guess."

"So it seems," Mike Loder answered. "Wrong tip-off, indeed! If Gunther only knew. Mike grinned to himself.

Gunther moved down the long car.

Surreptitiously, Mike pushed the sack to one side with his foot, away from the other register pouches. He had, he told himself gloatingly, only to wait until they reached Alton and the crew left the mail car to have a midnight snack at the railroad restaurant. Then a snatch—and escape! In a few hours he would be on his way by bus to the Border.

Lighting a cigarette, he strolled down the car to where Gunther was entering registers at his case.

"Getting near Alton, I guess."

"Yes, Inspector." Gunther had a disagreeable habit of snuffing his nose. Mike edged away from him. He leaned against young Webb's letter case, gazed through the window.

He could see the Rio Grande in the distance, shimmering in the light of the rising moon, and he smelled the heavy sweet odor of the blossoming alfalfa fields that stretched from the track to the banks of the river. Houses began to dot the landscape.

The train pulled into Alton. Mike's pulses began to sing with excitement, yet he kept a cool head. The clerks were making preparations to leave the car, all, that is, except Gunther.

"Aren't you getting off to eat?" Mike asked him, striving to show only casual interest.

"No, sir. I'm not feeling very well," Gunther answered, a bit apologetically. He sneezed, blew his nose.

Gritting his teeth, Mike tried to impersonate the sympathetic official, concerned for the man under him.

"Cold?"

"No, hay fever. This alfalfa country brings it on something awful. I'll be glad when we get out of the valley." He sneezed again, then said to Webb, "Hey, wait a minute. I almost forgot."

Scribbling a few lines on a sheet of paper, he handed it to his clerk. "Wire the agent at Ashfield to have two trucks waiting to pick up those mail catalogs."

"Yes, sir." Webb swung to the ground and disappeared up the platform after the other clerks.

Mike swallowed the lump that kept rising in his throat. By almost superhuman effort he resisted the impulse to grab Gunther by his skinny throat and make an end to him. Of all the blasted luck!

SERIOUSLY, Mike Loder pondered upon the problem, even estimating the risk involved in shooting Gunther and making off with the pouch. It would be easy enough to do, he decided, for the clerk was frail and his attention was centered on a newspaper he had picked up from among the "nixies." The greatest danger lay in the sound of the shot being heard.

Mike Loder decided to take the risk. He reached inside his coat pocket and gripped the butt of the pistol that hung beneath his left armpit. His hand came away reluctantly. Bright arc lights had flashed on outside. Crowds of people began pushing forward. The Eastern Flyer, due an hour before, had just pulled in and was disgorging passengers.

Cursing silently, Mike stared out at the people. He remembered suddenly the little town of Adobe, two hours' run up the line. At two o'clock in the morning the place would be deserted, for there was nothing there save a one-room depot, a water tank, and a scant half-dozen adobe houses scattered over the mesa.

This train, No. 9 stopped there briefly, he recalled, just long enough to exchange mail. Just long enough for him, Mike, to make his escape with the pouch. Even if he had to kill the whole crew and the station agent to do it.

The clerks returned, talking and joking with each other, and the train began to move. Mike sat quiescent on the stool, his sharp, brown eyes watchful. A half-hour passed. An hour. Two hours. The men conversed with him briefly, and at intervals for they were busy. The train whistled its approach to Adobe. Mike slid from the stool, reached inside his coat. He stood tense, poised to act, a fine dew on his forehead. He saw young Webb leave his letter case, saw him push the door back on its rollers. The train slowed to a stop.

Now!

"This is a stick— . . ."

The words died in Mike's throat. Aghast, his grip on the pistol relaxed. Outside, the little depot and the wooden platform were ablaze with lights. Hundreds of soldiers, passengers on a troop train standing on the siding, stretched their legs on the platform. Dozens of them came crowding around the mail car, letters and cards clutched in their

upthrust fists. Good-naturedly, Webb accepted as many as he could hold and then indicated the letter box on the side of the car.

Mike slumped down on the stool again. His body was clammy with the cold sweat that covered it. Again he felt that clutching nausea. Gone—gone was the opportunity on which he had counted so heavily. It would be nothing short of suicide to attempt anything now.

Military police paraded up and down the platform. He had just one chance left, one last desperate chance. Ashfield. A small mountain town, Ashfield might prove risky, for the depot and telegraph station were kept open all night. But it was a chance he would have to take. He no longer had any choice in the matter.

Clutching the stanchion, Mike felt the train begin to move. Webb was closing the door when a shout came from outside and the station agent, waving his cap, pushed through the crowd of soldiers toward the mail car. Webb leaned over and grabbed the sheet of paper which the agent thrust toward him. Closing the door, Webb glanced at it briefly and then handed it to Gunther.

"Here's an answer about those trucks," Webb said—and winked.

Mike saw the wink. He was to wonder afterward how he could have been so stupid as not to catch its significance.

BEFORE he knew what was happening, Gunther had cast the telegram aside and yanked the pistol from his side and swung around facing Mike. Despite his frailty, the clerk-in-charge looked both businesslike and purposeful. By now, every other clerk in the car had drawn his pistol, too. Mike's head weaved from side to side, facing six Colt .32s.

"All right, fella—hand over the gun." Gunther spoke softly, but the grim look in his eyes belied the softness of his voice.

Bewildered, Mike handed over his own pistol. There wasn't much else he could do, for the feel of six steel barrels poking various spots in his body argued no disobedience.

When he had been disarmed and searched, Mike heard young Webb read the telegram aloud.

"Wire from Ashfield received. Inspector Heflin found murdered, Raton.

Credentials missing. Hold impostor for officers at Ashfield.”

Webb folded the bit of paper neatly into a square. “It’s signed by the chief inspector himself. Good work, Gunther!”

“How’d you guess, Gunther?” one of the other clerks asked.

Mike listened intently, wondering where he had made the slip.

“Well, I’ll tell you. Heflin rode the line at this same time last year. I had just transferred over from L. A. The alfalfa and train dust in this valley gave me hay fever so bad I wasn’t able to work. The inspector had it himself. He’d had it for years, he said, so he told me how to treat it. He even gave me some of his own medicated cigarettes to

smoke and told me to spray my nose with the new atomizer he had just bought for himself.” The clerk paused, his grim glance on Mike.

“Yes,” prompted Webb.

“Well, when I saw this guy didn’t even have a sniffle, and he didn’t remember what was wrong with me, I got suspicious. And once my suspicions were aroused, I began to notice that he didn’t ring true. So—” He shrugged.

Suddenly Mike was conscious of the close air in the mail car and the cindery dust and the sickening lurch of the train. And the heat. The dry heat of the summer night. But it wasn’t as hot as the electric chair that awaited him in Santa Fe. Nothing was as hot as that—except the place he would be bound for.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

MURDER IN MINK

A Johnny Castle Mystery Novelet

By C. S. MONTANYE

AND MANY OTHER THRILLING STORIES

“I TALKED WITH GOD”

(Yes, I Did . . . Actually and Literally)

and as a result of talking with God, there was disclosed to me what is the most remarkable spiritual discovery of the ages. I discovered that in every man and woman there lives the most dynamic spiritual Power this world can ever know. So dynamic, and so fraught with tremendous possibilities is this Power, that its existence in you will amaze you with what it can do for you right here on earth.

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(Adv.)

The Fat Undertaker

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

Benign, two-hundred-and-seventy-pound Dicken Cook investigates the sudden death of Doc Pontius and proves to Hoxley Corners that you can't embalm murder!

CHAPTER I

FEUD OF THE BROTHERS



KILLING in the Pontius family was something that Hoxley Corners had anticipated with dread for eighteen years. It was queer, Dicken Cook remarked afterward, that when the expected happened, not even those who saw it happen, recognized it as murder.

At three o'clock that blistering hot afternoon, Dicken Cook's funereal black sedan rolled off the white glare of the state highway into the space in front of Hoxley's General Store and parked behind a contrastingly gay yellow roadster.

Dicken Cook, two hundred and seventy pounds of lugubrious black alpaca, got from the sedan and plodded to the end of the platform in front of the store, where twelve-year-old Timmy Hoxley had nailed a wood sign that read:

FOR SALE
LIVE BAIT & FISH WORMS

The sign was important only in that it offered a handhold for helping Dicken Cook to the platform.

Gaunt, grizzled Jim Hoxley was in the store, leaning back into grocery shelves, with one foot cocked up on the edge of the wrapping counter. As Dicken entered, Jim was talking to a young couple that had evidently emerged from the yellow car out in front.

The girl had blue-black hair worn in a short bob. She was tall, slim-hipped, and aware that her maize-yellow slack

suit became her. Maybe her haughty nose was God-given, or she might have been distastefully sampling the mingled odors of green vegetables, soap chips, harness and chick feed.

The young man wore white flannels and carried a new fishing-tackle box. An adolescent lankiness about him contrasted with shrewd, close-set eyes and thinning blond hair. The sun had given his receding forehead a raw beef burn.

"Don't let anybody tell you the Wabash is fished out," Jim Hoxley was saying vehemently. "You rent a boat from Timmy and try it up a piece beyond Sycamore Bend—"

JIM HOXLEY broke off to turn to Dicken Cook. A toothless grin brought deep black wrinkles into the storekeeper's face.

"Dicken, I don't guess you remember a little shaver in short pants that came visiting Maude Rienard one summer back in 'twenty-five. Now I think of it, you wasn't even in the neighborhood at that time."

Dicken shook his head. His Panama hat, placed squarely and without a trace of jauntiness, went back and forth like the agitator of a washing machine. "I wasn't here in 'twenty-five, Jim."

"Well, anyway, Dicken," Jim said, "that little shaver is Bob Grimes here, Maude Rienard's nephew. He and Missus Grimes been living up at the Rienard place since April and you haven't met yet. Folks, this is Dicken Cook."

Dicken smiled benignly upon the young couple. He jammed a huge hand down into the baggy side pocket of his

A BAFFLING COMPLETE NOVELET



As the blond man raised his gun, Dicken slashed at the rope

black alpaca coat, took out his business card which he handed to Bob Grimes.

The card was centered by a smiling likeness of Dicken Cook's bland face, and above this picture was the inscription: "You All Know This Undertaker."

Below was, "Visit Our Peace Chapel."

"I thought I'd meet you folks at Maude Rienard's funeral," Dicken said, "but I heard you couldn't make it all the way up from Florida in time."

He had also heard that Mr. and Mrs.

Robert Grimes had let no dust collect on their luggage after Maude Rienard's will had been read, however. Maude had left everything to her nephew—the section of fertile valley land that comprised the Rienard farm, a twenty-thousand-dollar brick house, and eighty thousand in cold cash.

Mrs. Grimes' moist red lips curved slightly—a smile, of sorts. Her voice was warmer with the soft accent of the South in it. "Bob wasn't feeling well when his Aunt Maude died, Mister Cook."

Dicken's sigh first ballooned pink cheeks, then escaped in a gust from his rosebud mouth.

"A beautiful service we had for Maude. A fitting tribute to a fine woman." He turned his head, feeling Bob Grimes' shrewd blue eyes upon him.

"My lawyer from the city took care of your bill, didn't he, Mister Cook?"

Dicken nodded. "You didn't think I was dunning you, did you, Mister Grimes? Just gave you my card so you'd know where to find me."

Jim Hoxley cackled. "You don't have to be dead to drop in on Dicken Cook."

A shudder twisted Mrs. Grimes' admirable shoulders. She turned to her husband. "Bob, if we're going to do any fishing—"

"Yes," Bob Grimes agreed, laughing. "We mustn't keep the fish waiting, Edith. Pleased to meet you, Mister Cook."

The young couple went out through the feed-room door.

"Nice young folks," Jim Hoxley said, loudly diplomatic. Then he took his foot off the counter and asked Dicken Cook what it would be. Dicken put down his grocery list and ration book.

"Do what you can for me, Jim. I've got to eat." He patted his bay window with widespread hands. "You've heard over the radio—save your waist fat."

Hoxley cackled. "You're a card, Dicken. For an undertaker. Liking to eat like you do, it's a wonder you don't wish you was blind like Doc Pontius across the river. 'Cause he lives by himself and gets his own meals, ration board ruled he was to have all the can goods he's a mind to."

Dicken's Panama hat agitated. "I don't wish I was blind," he said soberly. "I wonder if the food situation gets real

tight if maybe Fred Pontius won't make up with his brother just to get a square meal."

"Nope, Dicken. Those two been going at it cat-and-dog, or maybe Cane-and-Abel, for so long a time now I figure they forgot what the original fuss was about. And Fred Pontius is mean. As mean as they come. And Doc's one to hold a grudge."

Hoxley paused to scratch his ear, then continued.

"Why, you take six weeks ago, Doc was in here and so was Bob Grimes who just went out. I had Doc shake hands with Bob, and Bob says, nice as you please, 'I believe I've met your brother.' Doc Pontius, old and blind as he is, bristles right up and says, 'You don't need to mention him in my presence.'"

RUBBER-BOOTED feet clumped on the floor of the feed room, and Jim Hoxley's grandson burst into the front part of the store. Timmy was out of breath, his tanned face flushed, his brown eyes round and bright.

Suspended from his neck by a strap and dangling to within six inches of his knees was a pair of field-glasses he had won as a premium for selling magazine subscriptions.

"Gosh, Gramps!" he gasped. "Gosh, what I saw would make a hen crow! I was waitin' for Fred Pontius to make up his mind if he would spend two bits for a dozen minnows, and I happened to look across the river and saw somethin' goin' on behind the willows in front of Doc Pontius' place. I took a look through my spy-glass, and Doc has got his big dog hung by the neck over the porch rail!"

Jim Hoxley cocked a skeptical eyebrow. "Pshaw now, Timmy, I don't think Doc would do that to his own brother, let alone a faithful old dog like Ham."

"Well, Ham's kickin' the air like all-get-out," Timmy insisted. His big brown eyes appealed to Dicken. "You believe me, don't you Mister Cook?"

"Truth from the mouths of babes is always worth looking into, anyway," Dicken declared solemnly. He put a hand on Timmy's slim shoulder and started back through the feed-room door. Jim Hoxley followed them.

The rear quarter of the Hoxley store was mounted on eight-foot stilts driven

into the river bank, and the shelter beneath the floor housed Timmy's live bait tanks. Two flights of skeleton stairs reached down from the back door to the land end of the pier.

Fred Pontius, the blind doctor's brother, stepped out from the shelter onto the first landing as Dicken and the two Hoxleys appeared. He was a short, thick-set man in his fifties, with coarse features and a wiry bush of sun-streaked red hair.

Timmy bounded down to the first landing and took a brief look through the field-glasses while Dicken and Jim Hoxley were following him. Timmy offered the glasses to Fred.

"I wouldn't look *that* direction with my naked eye, let alone with them glasses," Fred Pontius grouched. "What would I want to bring *him* closer to me for than he is now?"

Dicken joined Timmy on the landing, took the glasses from the boy's hand. He glanced at Fred. Fred's lower lip was thrust up and over its mate. His green eyes were looking daggers at Timmy for even suggesting that he look in his brother's direction.

Dicken sighed heavily and raised the field-glasses to bring into focus the house on the piles on the opposite bank of the river. Plumy green willows obscured most of the upper structure, but a portion of the porch rail was visible. And Timmy's tale was essentially fact.

There was no sign of Doc Pontius, but Doc's brindle Great Dane was hanging below the level of the porch floor, kicking frantically a good two feet above the ground.

"Timmy," Dicken said, "I guess we ought to get over there right away. I guess your putt-putt boat will beat time on going around by the bridge in a car." He passed the glasses to Jim Hoxley, smiled blandly at Fred Pontius. "Don't suppose you'd like to go along, Fred?"

Fred flattened his hands on broad hips and spat on the landing floor. "If I liked the other side of the river, I'd live over there, Dicken."

Dicken grunted, creaked down the steps and onto the pier that reached out into greenish brown water. Three flat-bottom rowboats were moored there and Timmy was already in the one equipped with the outboard motor.

Upstream a little ways near the bend

marked by a huge overhanging sycamore was the boat Mr. and Mrs. Grimes had rented. Bob Grimes was at the oars, stroking just enough to hold his position in the swift-moving current. Edith Grimes, a calendar picture in her colorful, fitted costume, waved at them and then pointed toward Doc Pontius' house.

"What's going on there?" she called to them.

"That's what we aim to find out," Dicken shouted back.

Timmy said, "Gee, Mrs. Grimes talks pretty—'theah' for 'there'." His self-conscious flush was scarcely discernible beneath his tan. He wound his motor-starting rope for a priming spin; wound again, and yanked cough life into the thing.

Dicken eased himself down onto the center thwart and facing the blunt prow. A strange sense of uneasiness came over him as the boat made its ungraceful way out into current.

Even without the aid of field-glasses, he could clearly see the brindle Dane kicking at the end of its rope over the rail of the porch. There was a lot of dog there—a hundred and thirty pounds anyway.

If the dog was attached by means of its harness, it wouldn't do itself any great amount of damage. But then it wasn't the Dane that Dicken was worried about.

When they were a little better than midstream, close enough to see the outline of the flat-roofed house in spite of the overhanging willows, the dog gave a final convulsive kick that must have utilized every muscle in its powerful body.

The leash snapped. The Dane landed on its back, righted itself, turned around twice with all the leggy awkwardness of a month-old calf. And then he was streaking for the woods that reached down to the shore at the north end of Doc Pontius' beach frontage.

"Lookit!" Timmy shrilled. "Like a streak of greased lightning. Ham musta had the wits scared clean out of him!" He cut his throttle. "Not much sense to us goin' on, is there?"

"Contrary-wise," Dicken said, staring at the spot in the thicket at which the Great Dane had vanished. "How come Doc didn't come to the rescue? He sure would have heard the row going on. And

he's got to be home if Ham was home."

"M'gosh!" Timmy realized the significance of this and opened his throttle wide for a final spurt. Up the river a little way, they could see the Grimes boat with Bob. The oars had altered its course and the boat was now heading toward Doc's beach.

CHAPTER II

"MURDER BY PERSONS UNKNOWN"



THEY were coming into the shallows. Timmy shorted off his motor and bore down on the tiller to tilt the screw up clear of the bottom. The scowl-like snout of the boat grated on the pebbled beach.

Dicken Cook lumbered forward and onto dry land, sidestepped an ugly but harmless gray water snake that had been sunning itself on the stones. Except for the crunch of gravel as Timmy joined Dicken, the oppressively warm, still air was without sound.

A flight of wood steps reached to Doc Pontius' porch eight feet above the ground. At the top of the steps was a baby gate which Jim Hoxley had installed for the blind man after Doc had taken a tumble. Dicken reached the foot of the steps, paused with a big hand on the rail.

"Doc," he called, "you home?"

The echo of Dicken's voice from the underside of the pile-mounted structure was the only answer. Dicken plodded up the steps, swung an elephantine leg over the gate, and stood half on, half off the porch.

"What you see?" Timmy breathed from behind him.

"Doc," Dicken replied succinctly. He stared at the overturned folding-chair and at Doc Pontius' legs in white duck pants making a crooked V on the porch floor. Then he went all the way over the baby gate.

Old Doc Pontius sat on the floor with his back to the solid porch rail. His gray head hung forward loosely on his chest.

Around his neck was a noose of leather—the broken leash of the Great Dane—drawn so tightly at the back that the flesh of Doc's neck seemed to have grown around it. The noose had been formed by drawing up a portion of the leash through the looped handle.

Dicken had seen Doc make just such a noose of Ham's leash and put it around his own neck in order to free his hands for loading his pipe or for opening his wallet. It certainly looked as though that habit had been his undoing.

The dog must have jumped from the porch rail—not much of a stunt for a Dane of that size—while the old man had dozed.

Doc had been jerked from his chair, and the blood-congested face and swollen tongue of the dead man told the rest of the story. A hangman couldn't have done a better job.

DICKEN actually heard Timmy swallow. The big undertaker turned slowly to meet the boy's frightened eyes. Timmy's near-pallor offered little protective coloration for his freckles.

"Mister Cook, is he—is he—"

"Doc's at peace," Dicken said. He cleared his throat. "Timmy, you take your putt-putt boat out and head off Fred Pontius. Maybe he'll come over here now."

Timmy was grateful for release. He thumped down the steps and then raced across the strip of pebbled beach, was shoving off his boat just as the Grimeses came heading into the shallows. Bob Grimes called to the boy.

"Is something wrong?"

Evidently Timmy replied, for Edith Grimes said: "How perfectly terrible." She scrambled to the prow of the boat and sprang lightly ashore. Dicken could see the yellow flash of her slack suit through the overhanging branches of willows as she fitted toward the porch stair.

"Mister Cook!" she called and looked up at him from below. Her face was almost lovely, now that she had forgotten to be supercilious. "Mister Cook, I finished a Red Cross training course before we left Miami. Are you sure—"

"Of course he's sure," Bob Grimes said, coming up behind her. Edith Grimes seemed to have forgotten that Dicken Cook had seen many a dead man.

Edith's pert figure seemed to wilt a little. She stepped aside to let her husband come up the steps. Bob's lanky legs took the treads three at a time. The baby gate was no obstacle. He stood there on the porch, shrewd, close-set eyes widening a little.

"Don't come up," he said rather absently to Edith. "He—it isn't pretty." He uttered a short, nervous laugh. "Death never is."

"I don't know," Dicken Cook said mildly. He stood with solid legs slightly spread, white hat firmly planted on his head. "You get older and you get different ideas about death. We still don't know what death is—but it isn't work and worry and strife. Especially, it isn't strife like Doc always had with his brother."

He looked out through the overhanging branches at the sun glare on the river. "I forgot to tell Timmy to phone the county office for the coroner."

"Coroner?" Bob Grimes stared. "Why?"

"When they die with their boots on, it's almost always a job for the coroner," Dicken said. "I should know. I was coroner two terms running. Can't call from here. Doc had his phone taken out when he found out a blind doctor couldn't hold much of a practise. He used to say he didn't want to call anybody, and if nobody needed him, what was the use of a phone?"

Bob Grimes turned to the top of the steps again and called down to his wife. "Honey, you could cut through the woods and that would bring you right out in our pasture and just a step from the house. You could phone in for the coroner."

"I'll be glad to," Edith said warmly.

"And if you'll phone the mortuary for me, please, Mrs. Grimes," Dicken added. "Ask for Jos Ambrose and have him drive over with my ambulance. I know Doc would want me to take care of him, regardless of what Fred Pontius may or may not decide."

Edith Grimes started off for the wood at a hurried walk. Dicken opened the baby gate and sat down heavily on the top step. Young Bob Grimes joined him, offering Dicken a cigarette. Dicken's white hat agitated in refusal.

"I saw the dog jump about the time Edith and I were out into the current. I thought perhaps he was taking out after a rabbit."

Dicken sighed. "Don't seem like Doc's Dane to do a thing like that. Ham never chased anything. The only docile dog of the breed I ever saw. As a watchdog, a blind and deaf toy poodle would

have had Ham beat. It's funny. Down-right funny."

"The dog certainly took off for somewhere, and kept right on going," Bob insisted, lighting his cigarette.

"Ham will be back. Just got a scare, hanging there. Frayed the leash right through against the porch rail with his kicking the air."

BOB GRIMES leaned a sharp shoulder against the end of the rail. "What do we do?"

"Just wait," Dicken said patiently. "There's a lot of waiting to do in the country. We just wait and life comes right to us instead of us getting all tired out chasing it. Right peaceful now, anyway."

They waited. Timmy Hoxley's boat returned to the beach, but with Jim Hoxley at the tiller rather than Timmy. Jim was all riled up the way Fred Pontius was acting. Timmy had followed Fred out to the bend where the latter was fishing, in order to break the news. Fred had simply told Timmy to go away and stop scaring the fish.

The three of them waited—Bob, Dicken, and Jim. Dicken's ambulance arrived, and then the coroner and his physician. The medical man's examination was brief—death by strangulation. Dicken and Bob Grimes told their stories, also brief, and the coroner released the body to Dicken Cook.

Only one thing troubled the county official.

"What do I put it down as, Mister Cook?" the coroner asked. "'Accidental strangulation' sounds funny. Since the dog was the cause, 'Act of God,' don't seem proper."

Jim Hoxley uttered an unseemly cackle. "Could call it gone to the dogs, Mister Coroner."

Dicken Cook grunted. "Maybe you'd better wait till after the inquest." Dicken always had felt he was entitled to a third term as coroner.

Dicken's assistant, Jos Ambrose, took the body to the mortuary, and Dicken and Bob Grimes crossed with Jim Hoxley in the outboard boat, with the rowboat Bob had rented in tow.

Timmy was nowhere in sight and Bob Grimes in the prow of the outboard had to reach out to grasp the pier and bring the boat to its moorings. He was awk-

ward about that as about everything else and would have fallen into the water if Dicken hadn't steadied him.

Presently, Grimes went dashing away from the front of the store in his yellow roadster, while Dicken Cook's big black sedan made its leisurely way along the road in the opposite direction.

The mortuary was a quarter of a mile up the road from Hoxley's store—an artistically beautiful structure of sandstone, constructed after a Gothic chapel.

Granite grave monuments stood on the front lawn with price tags where inscriptions should have been. On both sides and at the back were fields of blossoming clover.

Dicken entered the beautifully appointed reception hall. From the funeral chapel on the left came an improvised version of "Mister Five By Five" played on the new electric organ.

Dicken Cook, who might easily have inspired that bit of boogie-woogie, frowned his disapproval as he plodded back along a carpeted hall to a brilliantly white room at the back where Jos Ambrose waited.

Dicken shook his head. "I always take care of my personal friends personally," he announced. "You get along, Jos, and tell Bennet to stop that—that hep-cat stuff."

Fifteen minutes later, Dicken came out of the white room, came along the hall in his spotless tunic, entered a small office that seemed to shrink perceptibly once he was inside.

He reached for the phone, called in to the county seat. Big fingers of his left hand drummed soundlessly on the edge of the desk while he waited for the coroner's hello.

"Dicken Cook speaking," he finally had the opportunity of announcing. "You get a medical man who can perform a post mortem out here tonight, or tomorrow at the latest. I just got through washing Doc Pontius' body, but I'm not pumping an ounce of embalming fluid."

Dicken paused impressively, then announced:

"I'm holding the body in the cooler pending autopsy because there's what looks to be a hypodermic needle puncture in a vein in the right ankle. . . . And wait a minute, Mister Coroner. If you're still worried about what to call this case, 'Murder by person or persons

unknown' will be good enough until you get a verdict!"

CHAPTER III

DOG WHISTLE



IT WAS shortly after dusk that Dicken Cook's phone rang and it proved to be Jim Hoxley on the wire. Doc Pontius' Great Dane had turned up, moping around the store.

"And giving me the blue willies," Jim complained. "He was limping some when I fetched him into the feed room, and I thought that was it. Timmy and I took a little sliver of old straw out of his left front paw, and that put an end to his limping, but danged if he don't act plumb queer. He keeps listening, Dicken, when there ain't a solitary sound to hear. I—er—wish you'd sort of drop in and see what you think."

A few minutes later, Dicken Cook's black sedan rolled in front of the store and a little way beyond the gas pump. Dicken alighted to find Timmy sitting on the front platform of the building, swinging his legs over the edge.

Timmy had a shiny metallic cylinder in his mouth. His cheeks were puffed out and he was making a toot-toot sound that originated somewhere between his nose and throat.

"What you got there?" Dicken asked cheerfully.

"Whistle," Timmy said. "But it's busted or maybe water-logged. I found it in the river under the pier. Maybe it's got mud in it. A nice whistle, though."

Dicken took the whistle from the boy, squinted into the mouthpiece. He produced his knife — one of those spring blade affairs that opens at the touch of a button—and stuck the tip of the blade down into the mouthpiece. It wasn't clogged. He put the whistle to his lips, blew hard, but couldn't evoke an audible tweet. He returned it to the boy.

"Nice whistle," he agreed, and then went into the store.

Jim Hoxley was back in the feed room sitting on a pile of grain sacks, stroking the head of Doc Pontius' brindle Dane.

The big dog got to its feet as Dicken Cook entered and began to wag its tail. Dicken said, "Nice Ham," and the Dane came to him with head lowered and a

sad expression in its large, intelligent eyes.

The dog still wore its harness with the broken length of leash attached to a ring at the top. The metal ring had been drawn into an oval apparently by the weight of the beast when it had hung over Pontius' porch rail.

SUDDENLY the Great Dane lost all interest in Dicken Cook. Long, powerful legs stiffened, head cocked on one side, nostrils quivered.

"Watch him," Jim Hoxley said, voice quiet with awe. "That's what I mean. Listening."

The dog trotted to the feed-room door, stood there, alert, listening with every fiber of its beautiful body.

"There ain't a soul out there," Jim insisted. "Not a soul. He's been doing that ever since he lit here, Dicken."

The grain sacks under Hoxley's bony hips stirred uneasily as the storekeeper altered his position.

"Dicken, you don't figure Doc's come back to plague that dog for what he done, do you?"

Dicken's hat agitated. He watched the dog. Ham got prone on the floor, head resting between forelegs. Large liquid eyes shifted from Hoxley's wrinkled visage to Dicken's bland face.

"No, Jim," Dicken said, "Ham hasn't a thing on his conscience. It was a two-legged beast that did for Doc Pontius. I think that Doc was drugged, put on the porch there in broad daylight, with the dog leash around his neck like a hang-noose.

"How the killer managed to make the dog jump off that rail is a little vague right now, but it'll come." He nodded, round face sober. "It'll come."

"Ham's doing that listening stuff again," Jim Hoxley said. "Makes me sort of nervous—the dog listening for something that ain't there."

"Suppose we leave the dog right where he is," Dicken suggested. "Let Timmy take charge of the store, and you go with me over to Doc's place for a look around."

Jim rubbed his grizzled jaw thoughtfully. "I'm agreeable."

They found Timmy out in front, still playing with the whistle he had found. Dicken asked to see it again, and after another examination, pulled a dollar

from his pocket and gave it to the boy.

"For security for the loan of your whistle, Timmy," he said, his eyes dancing. Then he put the whistle in his own pocket and led the way to the car.

Dicken and Jim drove away from the store and toward the next cross-road that was bridged over the river. Dicken was interested in hearing more about the quarrel between Doc and Fred Pontius.

"You remember what it was about, Jim?"

The storekeeper cackled. "Sure do. It all started eighteen years ago, a good spell before Doc went blind. Fred was farming like he is now, and he had a Scotch collie that got vicious. That summer the collie took a nip out of some youngun's hand. If I recollect right, it was one of the Anderson boys. Maybe not, but the Anderson boys were little tikes at the time, though you'd never know it now, with them both fighting with the Navy—"

"About the Pontius brothers' fuss, Jim," Dicken prompted.

"Sure, sure. Whoever this little boy was, the hand that was bit got an infection, and the boy was taken to Doc for treatment. Doc told me the kid would lose the use of one of his fingers, on account of one of the tendons along the back of the hand healed short or something.

"Anyway, Doc said the boy would never be able to straighten that finger out. It would always flop back against the palm of his hand.

"Doc found out it was Fred's dog that did the damage. He billed Fred for the doctoring, and that made Fred sore. Then Doc got sore, took out after Fred's collie with a rifle and shot it dead. Fred and him has been going it cat-and-dog ever since. Eighteen years."

THE black sedan rumbled across the bridge, turned right on the county road that cut through a portion of the Grimes property and then angled down toward the river.

Dicken parked just behind the entrance to a short lane that led toward Doc Pontius' house. The two men got out, walked down the lane with the help of a flashlight Dicken had taken from the glove compartment.

Piles that supported the doctor's

house were not over three feet long at the rear of the house, graduating into longer lengths toward the front to compensate for the pitch of the river bank.

They went around to the front, mounted the steps to the porch, and discovered the front door unlocked. They went into Doc's tidy living room that had also served as a reception room for his patients when he had practised.

Dicken's hulking figure pushed on through a connecting doorway into the doctor's office, flashlight beam darting from wall to wall.

"Like we was burglars, Dicken," Jim cackled nervously.

Drawers of an old-fashioned oak filing-cabinet were standing open, and it wasn't like Doc to leave unnecessary projections around to bump into. Dicken stepped to the desk; the roll-top had been left open.

On the desk surface were a number of small packages and bottles from chemical houses—samples of medicines that Doc still received through the mail. Dicken picked up a couple of identical vials, both marked "Professional Sample," and labeled:

EPIVAL BRAND

Methylcyclohexenylmethyl—Barbituric Acid

Dicken didn't try to pronounce it, but the instructions on the label explained it was a new anesthetic which when injected into a vein acted within ten seconds and produced a period of unconsciousness lasting thirty minutes.

"This would do the trick," he said to Jim. "Suppose somebody swiped some of this from Doc and a syringe to go with it. It would be mighty easy to hold Doc down and shoot some of this into him.

"Soon as he was under, the murderer must have moved Doc out onto the porch and put him in a chair. Then the killer got the dog up on the rail, made the leash into a hangman's rope, put the noose over Doc's head, and left. Plenty of time after that to get over onto the other side of the river—"

Dicken paused, a troubled scowl gathering his nearly white eyebrows together. "Time enough to switch dogs, too," he muttered.

"What's that? You mean to tell me it wasn't Doc's dog that jumped from the rail?"

"Nope, it wasn't," Dicken said positively. "I don't think Ham would have done that. Why would he? He don't chase rabbits. He don't give a toot for other dogs, and he wouldn't even chase Fred Pontius off the premises.

"It's got to be another dog," Dicken said with conviction. "That's how come Ham didn't turn up until tonight. Ham had to be held until the other dog was found. Remember, the other dog had the wits scared out of him when the leash broke and he ran for the woods. The killer would have been sunk if there were two brindle Danes running around loose."

"Sure, sure," Jim admitted, "but Ham's harness looked like it had been hung by. That ring the leash was attached to was sprung, and—" He paused and cackled. "Well, easy enough to switch dog harnesses, too, I guess. But where's anybody going to get another dog enough like Ham to fool us?"

Dicken shrugged heavy shoulders. "Easy. And they wouldn't have to be alike. Get any fawn-colored Dane and paint black markings with hair dye. It would fool us, all right."

Jim's long thin nose began sniffing the air like a hound. "Seems like I smell a hot stove, Dicken. Don't you?"

Dicken shot a glance toward the dead doctor's filing case, then lunged heavily for a door which led into a hall communicating with the rear of the house. His heavy footsteps carried him back into the kitchen, with Jim Hoxley close behind.

"Told you I smelled a stove!"

CHAPTER IV

THE SCORCHED LEDGER



FIRE was blazing in the big wood range. Dicken flicked out a handkerchief to protect his hand from the fire-door handle, got the door open.

Bright orange flame of burning paper danced in the firebox, and right in the middle of the blaze was a ledger, its fiber-board covers already ablaze.

Dicken snatched a short poker, pulled the ledger through the fire-door. Simultaneously there came the crash of a shot from somewhere outside the house. A bullet drilled the back window and sub-

sequently the crown of Dicken's white hat.

"Drop, Jim!" Dicken warned, and set an example by flopping on the floor and flicking out his flashlight. He saw Jim scurry for shelter behind the end of a kitchen cabinet.

A second shot came through the window, whined above Dicken and caromed off the stove. Dicken flung up a fist to knock the stove door closed, then rolled to the edge of a rag rug. He picked up the rug and flung it over the burning ledger on the floor, plunging the room into darkness.

"You okay, Jim?" he whispered.

"Sure, sure. But my knees are sort of uncontrolled."

"Then stay where you are. I'm going out back."

"And leave me to be shot at? I guess you ain't!"

Jim Hoxley was practically on Dicken's coat-tails as the latter moved quietly to the kitchen door and slid the bolt from its socket. They went down three steps, and Dicken turned toward the southeast corner of the house.

The whistle which he had got from Timmy was in Dicken's huge fist. Maybe it would look like the barrel of a revolver to somebody—and maybe not.

He assumed a crouch, or as near that as his waistline would permit, and moved toward an old oil drum that Doc had used as a rain barrel.

And when he got there, somebody was on the other side—somebody who crouched better than Dicken did.

DICKEN stepped around the barrel, ran forward with the whistle as the man came upright. Dim night glow showed the gleam of the plated whistle and the man must have felt the cold end of it against his chest.

He stuck up both hands.

"Don't shoot!"

"Fred Pontius, sure as God made little green apples!" Jim Hoxley yelled. "And look out, Dicken, he's got something up there in his hand."

Dicken passed his flashlight to Jim. "Turn it on him, while I've got him covered."

Jim turned the light on Fred's sun-broiled face. Fred's lower lip stuck up and out, and his eyes narrowed to mean little slits.

"What the blazes you two doing, prowling around my property?"

Dicken grunted. "You don't know it's yours yet." He looked at Fred's upraised right hand. It held something that looked like a baking powder can.

He snatched it, dropped it into the baggy side pocket of his black alpaca coat. Then he started patting the pockets of Fred's blue denim jacket. That done, he reached under the jacket where his fingers paused.

Fred Pontius was wearing a swollen money-belt that crackled like a million dollars when Dicken pressed against the pouches.

"You leave that alone, Dicken Cook. It's mine, d'ya hear?" Fred backed away in sudden panic—which was most unfortunate.

The flashlight in Jim's hand showed Fred the whistle Dicken had been using for a gun. Fred uttered a short, bitter laugh. His right hand streaked for his hip pocket, and he yanked out an ancient but probably effective revolver.

"Now you two Nosey-Neds stand where you be. And Dicken, you just toss me that can you took."

Dicken sighed. He took the can from his pocket and coolly opened it. It was empty. He tossed it down at Fred's feet.

Fred snatched the can up, looked inside, threw it down again. He advanced, gun thrusting, eyes in an ugly mood.

"What did you do with the money that was in that can? You tell me, Dicken Cook, afore I give you a corpse you won't be able to embalm!"

"Better tell him," Jim urged nervously.

"Can't tell him," Dicken's voice boomed. "I never touched the can. How do you know it wasn't empty when you picked it up from back of that rain barrel?"

Fred said, "I'm searching you, Dicken," and did. Then he turned to Jim Hoxley and searched him frantically. He backed away from them, keeping them under the threat of his gun.

"Don't you two try to follow me. And if I find out you two foxed me, I'll skin the foxes." He backed right into the woods that flanked the house.

Neither Jim nor Dicken said anything until they could no longer hear the

crackle of branches in the woods. Then Jim broke the silence.

"A fine half-wit pair of detectives we make, Dicken!"

"We didn't do so bad. Didn't we find out Fred Pontius gets money out of cans he picks up around here? Maybe we'll make head and tail out of this yet."

And he led the way back into the kitchen of Doc Pontius' house and there recovered the ledger from beneath the rug. The covers were burned and the outer edges of the pages were scorched, but no other damage had been done.

Dicken put the ledger on the kitchen table.

WHILE Jim held the flashlight, he quickly turned the sheets until he reached pages devoted to outstanding bills and collections for the year nineteen hundred and twenty-five. His thick finger skated down the columns of figures, paused below one item:

"Maude Rienard—Office calls Aug. 25-27—\$6.00"

This line had been marked out in a single wavy line of pencil, and directly beneath was written:

"Transfer above to Fred Pontius."

"Why would Fred want to burn that?"

Jim asked.

"Fred didn't. You don't think Fred would have left us here and alive if he'd been the one to burn this, do you?"

Dicken took off his hat and poked a finger through the bullet hole. "If I had been the pin-head boy at the county fair, I'd be a dead freak by now. Fred wasn't shooting at us. The person who wanted these records burned did the shooting."

Dicken carried the ledger with him and they returned to the car to head the black sedan around in the opposite direction.

"I think we'll drop in on the Grimes family," Dicken announced. "You see, Jim, it couldn't have been one of the Anderson boys who got bit in the hand by Fred Pontius' collie back there eighteen years ago. Both the Anderson boys are in the Navy where there isn't any room for crippled fingers."

"Hadn't thought of that," Jim admitted.

"And according to you, the summer of nineteen twenty-five was when Bob Grimes visited his Aunt Maude Rienard.

You notice that entry in the ledger—a bill made out to Maude but which was transferred to Fred Pontius? That would just about have to be the bill for treating that dog bite.

"Maude didn't have any children, but that summer Bob Grimes was with her, a little shaver in knee pants. Doc wouldn't have billed the boy. He'd have billed Maude. Then when he found out who owned the dog—that's Fred—he transferred the bill to Fred."

Jim Hoxley snapped his fingers. "Makes sense, Dicken!"

"Seems it does." Dicken turned out the car lights and coasted to a stop at the side of the road and near the entrance to a gravel drive leading up to the big brick house that had once been Maude Rienard's. A single dim light burned in the lower story of the building.

Jim and Dicken got out, walked across a well-kept lawn toward the house. Dicken again had in his hand the whistle Timmy had found.

"You're not going to pan that thing off for a gun again, are you?" Jim asked apprehensively.

"Nope." He put the whistle to his mouth and blew on it without making any audible sound. He took the whistle out and listened. The night and the brick house were as silent as the whistle itself.

"Dicken Cook," Jim said, "you out of your head?"

"Nope. And keep your voice down to a whisper."

Dicken skirted the house, went toward the back. Again he put the whistle to his lips and blew, and again he listened.

"Now you're getting like Doc Pontius' dog," Jim said nervously. "Listening to sounds that ain't there."

"Shsh!"

From somewhere in the direction of a thick grove of trees beyond the chicken yard came a big dog's whimper and the sound of a big body thrashing branches.

"He heard it that time," Dicken whispered. "He heard the whistle. And I figure he's tied out there among those trees."

"Heard *what* whistle?"

"This one. There are sounds around us all the time we can't hear. This whistle happens to be pitched above the range of the human ear. But a dog can

hear it. Remember old Ham pricking up his ears in your feed room? Well, Timmy was tooting this whistle out in front at the time.

"Ham heard what Timmy couldn't hear. And if Ham had been a whistle-trained dog—one that would come through fire and brimstone when this whistle demands—he'd have probably gone right through your feed-room door, slicker than Superman.

"Remember, Jim," Dicken concluded weightily. "I told you they switched dogs in order to murder Doc Pontius and rig it to look like an accident."

Dicken handed the whistle to Jim Hoxley who wasn't too eager to take it.

"What you want me to do, Dicken? All this gives me the blue-willies. Sounds you can't hear, whistles you blow and nothing comes out."

"You just stand right where you are, and every once in a while—say on the count of twenty — blast away on the whistle. I'm going back into that catalpa grove, and if you hear me call 'Help!' like I mean it, you dash back to the car and go get somebody with a gun. If I just yell your name, it means I'm doing all right and you're to come."

CHAPTER V

DICKEN USES TECHNIQUE



DICKEN left the old store-keeper, went back through the chicken-yard gate and to the fence at the back. He practically demolished the fence getting over it.

Beyond were catalpa trees, perhaps originally planted to produce fence posts. The trees had matured or died and rotted, and the result was a dense and not particularly clean woods.

The whimpering of the dog became louder every rod or so that Dicken covered and he used the cries and the thrashing sounds as a compass.

He had gone perhaps a hundred feet when he caught sight of the beast and could hear it panting as it tried to break away.

Dicken switched on his flashlight. The dog tied to the tree was a Great Dane, perhaps a little bigger and heavier than Ham, but similarly marked — though that might have been faked.

With Dicken's light in its eyes, it forgot the whistle for a moment, showed its saberlike teeth, uttered that deep, thunderous growl that rolls only from the throat of a Dane.

Dicken had a way with dogs — he hoped.

Evidently Jim gave the whistle another blast, for the dog became intent on something besides Dicken. It lunged at the rope with everything it had in its powerful body. The rope held.

"That's how Doc was killed," Dicken muttered. "The devilish murderers sat out there on the river in a rowboat after they'd rigged their kill machine. Then they blew the whistle."

It was all a little more than Dicken Cook could wholly conceive. That blond boy with the close-set eyes and his dusky girl companion in the yellow slacks—killing a blind old man like Doc Pontius.

And of course they weren't Mr. and Mrs. Bob Grimes. Dicken was willing to bet that Bob Grimes had died down there in Florida some time before his Aunt Maude had died.

The slick lawyer—the man from the city who had paid Dicken for Maude's funeral—had rigged this blond boy right into dead Bob Grimes' shoes, and right into Maude Rienard's fortune.

And then somebody had begun blackmail because Bob Grimes had one useless finger on his right hand and this blond boy didn't.

THE big dog lunged again in an effort to obey the whistle call that Dicken couldn't hear. Dicken walked around the beast, squatted down beside the tree to unknot the rope.

"One moment."

That was the blond boy's voice. Dicken looked over his shoulder.

The boy was standing there in his white flannels and beside him was the girl in yellow slacks. The boy had a bolt action rifle, and as he slammed the bolt home with the heel of his right palm, Dicken could see there was nothing wrong with his fingers. Those shrewd, close-set blue eyes of the boy looked capable of drawing a pretty deadly bead.

Dicken turned coolly about, and then sat down to lean his broad back against the tree. He looked at the girl, and she wasn't beautiful—though may-

he death and a good undertaker like Dicken Cook could have made her beautiful.

"It comes to mind now why you wore white today, son," Dicken said. "When you were fixing the hang-noose on Doc Pontius and getting your whistle-trained dog parked on the porch rail, if somebody had seen you from across the river, they would have thought you were Doc."

"Doc always wore white. Of course, if you'd have buttoned your shirt pocket before you got out of Hoxley's boat returning to the pier later on, maybe you wouldn't have lost your dog whistle into the water there."

The blond boy didn't say anything. There was something about the way his eyes looked now, that didn't encourage conversation. Dicken nodded at the plunging dog tied to the tree against which Dicken leaned.

"You got to get rid of him, don't you?" he asked.

"And you, too," said the boy.

Dicken nodded. He rested his heavy chin in his right hand. His left hand eased down his thigh and to the ground, close to the opening of his trousers pocket.

"Let me set you straight on something, son. You're not Bob Grimes, and you go around killing everybody who knows you're not. Wouldn't it be a lot simpler to let a dog bite *you* in the hand, so maybe you'd develop a middle finger that wouldn't straighten out like Bob had?"

Fear brightened the eyes of the man and widened those of the girl. The dog kept lunging at its rope; kept whimpering. Dicken recalled unpleasantly the superstition about a howling dog and death.

"Somebody's been blackmailing you, son," he said. "Somebody sent you a threat letter saying you weren't Bob Grimes because Grimes had a crippled finger as a result of a dog bite Doc Pontius had treated. Doc was blind, but he'd shaken hands with you in Hoxley's store, so even though he was blind, he would have known there was nothing wrong with your finger."

"Just so," the blond boy said coldly. "Now, let's get this over—"

Dicken held up his right hand while its mate crept into his trousers pocket. "Just a minute. Doc always had a poor

memory. Chances are he didn't remember about Bob Grimes' funny finger. You killed the wrong party, Mister—and you, too, Madam."

The girl in yellow slacks clutched the man's arm. "Maybe *he's* the one who's been bleeding us." She nodded to indicate Dicken.

"Nuts! Dicken Cook never set eyes on me until this afternoon, I tell you. It was the old doctor had the hooks in us. Cook simply doped this all out. I told you I saw him trying to save Doc's records from the stove. I'd have killed him then, only I missed."

"Son," Dicken said sadly, "you're all mixed up. Just because the blackmail letters told you to leave the payments in a tin can somewhere around the outside of the Doc Pontius house, that doesn't mean Doc was the blackmailer. Fred Pontius was the one bleeding you. I caught him looking in that can tonight—and he found it empty. But he's got your dough tucked away in his money belt, just the same—the money from the previous payments."

"Why, you tell me why Fred wouldn't know about Bob Grimes' crippled finger the same as Doc knew. Fred and Doc got into a fuss that's lasted the past eighteen years all over that dog bite Bob got as a child. So it looks like you've got to think fast. You can't kill everybody."

"I'll start with you, though." The blond boy raised his gun, and at that moment, Dicken's left hand reappeared.

IN HIS fist was the knife with the spring blade. The blade opened even as Dicken lashed out at the taut-drawn rope that bound the Great Dane to the tree.

The rope snapped. The girl in yellow screamed. The dog streaked for the sound of that whistle no human ear could hear, and the blond boy brought his rifle around for a shot at the dog.

The dog had to die — that was the thing that was uppermost in the boy's mind, apparently. He and the girl must have had some anxious moments that afternoon when the dog had broken loose and gone off into the woods. For nothing could have been more embarrassing to the pair of killers than to have Ham's double turn up.

The dog had to die but the boy's

hurried shot missed. Dicken came up from the ground, moving faster than he had in twenty years.

He caught the boy's rifle, barrel and stock, twisted it, barrel up and stock down—twisted it out of the killer's hands.

He brought the rifle back over his right shoulder and drove it forward again, butt-plate first, the way he'd done in the last war; the way the boys were probably doing in this war. Dicken hadn't forgotten the technique.

The blond boy was out on his feet, and by the time he'd hit the ground there was blood on his face.

Dicken reversed the position of the gun, turned it on the girl.

"I never hit a lady, Ma'am," he said, "but there's got to be a first time for everything and you could be it."

She stood there tall and straight, arms at her sides, brown eyes staring down at the boy. Then her shoulders

wilted. She faced Dicken and the rifle, began shaking her head.

"No," she cried, "we didn't do it. The lawyer—it was his idea, all of it. He got a cut out of the estate. And when we were being blackmailed and it looked like the old doctor was the blackmailer, the lawyer said the doctor would have to go. The lawyer planned that, too. He got us the whistle-trained dog. You've got to believe that. You've got to."

"Oh, we'll get the lawyer all right," Dicken assured. "It'll be a three-way party. But don't try to tell me the lawyer blew the whistle that made the dog jump off the Doc's porch rail."

"You or the boy did it, right out there on the river. That's what I'm thinking about when I say I could knock you silly if you tried a getaway. Understand?"

She looked as though possibly she might understand. Dicken raised his voice to fog-horn volume.

"Jim," he shouted, "Oh—Jim!"

The Black Bat, Masked Nemesis of Crime, battles against Criminal Black Marketeers in **MARKETS OF TREASON**, *complete book-length novel by* G. WAYMAN JONES *in the Winter issue of*

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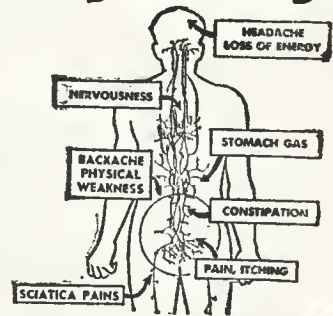
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Cigar-smoking Dave McClain of Homicide arms himself with special weapons when he goes manhunting!



Pohler thudded into the window, as the gat went off

PRIMED FOR BEAR

By JOHN L. BENTON

DAVE MCCLAIN got off the elevator at the fifth floor. All the way up from the shabby lobby of the Hotel Plimpton he had figuratively been holding his nose. The place was a cheap grind flop-house, off Broadway. The right spot for a murder, Mac thought.

The medical examiner and the rest of the staff were busy in Room 515. McClain, Captain Fred Mullin's right-hand man in the well-known Homicide Department, pushed his way through the group in the hall.

Starry-eyed actorines, little hoofers

from the night clubs, unshaven tip-and-toss specialists, hams from the agencies and some of the hotel's help were trying to get a gander at what was going on inside.

"Hello, Mac." The m.c. threw McClain a nod. "This way for the remains."

Mac looked at the stiff on the cot. "Who is he?"

"Floater by the name of Lou Knight. Gunned through the left temple about three this morning. Had a visitor last night, but no description. Regan's gathered up the prints."

McClain gave the small room a routine

going over. There was a table in the corner with two decks of cards on it. A hand had been dealt. Six cards, four face up. Mac nodded to himself. The game was Lafayette, a two-player gamble for those who wanted to lose money fast.

In a big china ash-tray were the cold stubs of two cigars. That reminded Mac. His face felt nude so he took a stogy from his pocket to dress it up. The gang at Headquarters made bets on how many cigars Dave McClain chewed, smoked and champed on in the course of an ordinary day.

Mac didn't turn up anything of interest. Mullin had grilled the guests along the corridor without uncovering a clue. McClain wandered out to the hall and pushed the button for the elevator.

THE operator was past draft age, a little guy with a dead pan and gray flecking his black hair. He avoided Mac's eyes as he brought the car to a stop.

"How's it going, Peter?"

"What do you mean — Peter? My name's Harry Blair."

"Around this dump," Mac smiled. "You're Pete Grant. You're on parole. You did a stretch for some strong-arm stuff. Ride me downstairs. We'll talk on the way."

"What about?"

"Last night—early this morning. You were on duty?"

"Until four. I had to come back because the regular day operator didn't show up. I sleep around the corner."

"Until four?" McClain nodded. "You must have taken quite a few riders up to the fifth floor."

"Sure, what's unusual about that?"

"Maybe," McClain went on, "you took somebody up to five-fifteen?"

"The captain already quizzed me," Grant said sullenly. "What I told him's on the record."

"I wasn't around for the show. Tell me," McClain urged softly.

The cage had reached the lobby. Grant put out a hand to open the door. Mac pushed it gently away.

"I didn't take nobody upstairs to the fifth floor!"

"Pete, you lie like a rug." McClain shook his head reprovingly. "You're scared. I can read you like a book, Peter. You don't want any part of this

—with the parole board on one side and the party you took up to Knight's room on the other. You're in the middle and that makes you sweat. Come on, spill. Who was it?"

"I tell you—"

McClain's blue eyes hardened. "And I tell you," he interrupted shortly, "that a hunk of hose gets plenty of conversation. Or maybe you'd like me to get in touch with the board. Take your choice, I'm not particular."

The elevator operator's dead pan face cracked. "Okay. I took Ernie Pohler up to the fifth floor and saw him go in Knight's room about two-thirty A.M. He left at five after three sharp."

"That," McClain murmured, "is using your knob, Peter."

Out on Broadway, Mac felt a cup of coffee and a new cigar would be a big help. So he stopped at a doughnut dug-out for a bucket of mocha and had them throw in a sinker for good measure.

He knew something about Ernest Pohler. The man was an Illinois cube-ster. In addition to dice games, Ernie went in for cards. Lou Knight had been a gambler, too. Sometimes Lou was in the blue chips after a lucky streak. More often, Knight scraped the bottom of the barrel.

But Ernie Pohler?

Mac dragged on his cigar and stirred his coffee thoughtfully. Six months around the main stem in search of easy cash. Before that, Mac had heard, Pohler had operated near Army camps and bases—until the M. P.'s got wise to his grift and drove him off the scene.

It should, Mac thought, be a cinch to put the arm on Pohler. But where to find him? Longacre Square and its environs were rabbit warrens when it came to locating somebody. McClain thought he'd start at Phil's Chophouse, a Fiftieth Street rendezvous for the set Pohler mixed with.

BUT when he reached the horn and hoof café, and dropped a casual question here and there, the patrons he spoke with suddenly got vague and absent-minded. Nobody knew Pohler or anything about him. McClain had the same kind of luck in the other spots he visited along the stem. Finally, in disgust, he went back to Headquarters.

"Get me a warrant for Ernie Pohler,"

he said to Mullin. "I'll hitch up the dog sled and mush out and find him tonight."

"Why?"

"Pohler was the guy Knight was playing Lafayette with at the time of his demise."

Captain Fred Mullin, pale-eyed and short-tempered, let his gaze wander over McClain's big body. He frowned at the line-up of cigars in McClain's upper vest pocket. Mullin, who neither smoked nor drank, thought cigar smoking was both unsanitary and disgusting.

"How do you know?"

"I dropped in to see an astrologer. He looked in his crystal ball—"

"Astrologers read star charts. They don't have crystal balls."

"Yeah?" Mac grinned. "Guess I got in the wrong parlor. Anyway, Pohler's your prospect."

Toward eight o'clock McClain, in the Ravenwood Tavern, adjacent to Times Square, got his first lead. The bartender there, an old friend of Mac's from way back, had some information.

"I don't know where Pohler kips," he said, drawing a beer for a customer and defoaming it neatly with a celluloid stick, "but I do know this. He's been giving Libby Mason plenty of go-around. You know her—the little frail with the taffy hair that does the Samba in the Argentine down the street."

"I don't—but I will." Mac's coat swung open. He fingered his array of cigars. In the middle was a fat, oily-looking weed sporting an embossed red band. He skipped that and took one of the panatellas instead. "Thanks, Jack. Here, whiff this when you get a chance. It's a twenty-cent smoke."

McClain wandered around to the rear of the Argentine. The night spot, a new one, did heavy business. All the wine and song joints were cleaning up these days. War workers, looking for diversion, chipped in extravagantly. Broadway was a boom town for theaters, eateries and dance dives.

Out front a featured band gave with the Hit Parade runner-up tune. Mac skirted the kitchens and wandered into that portion of the place where the girls in the ensemble of the floor show put on beads and feathers in cubicles of telephone booth size. There was a foyer and a red-headed dame, bundled in a bath-

robe, was making a call from a wall phone. The plaster around it must have held a couple of hundred scribbled numbers and notes.

Mac waited until she cooed off and gave her the office. "Just a minute, sister. Where'd you get that red top?"

The girl giggled. "Copper?"

McClain looked genuinely shocked. "Baby, am I as transparent as all that?"

"I've got X-ray eyes," she said. "I can see the badge in your pocket and the smoker in your shoulder clip."

"Those are just cigars," Mac grinned. He nodded toward a wicker seat built for two. "Park a minute. I want some information. Point out Libby Mason and we part friends."

THE redhead pursed lips sticky with rouge. "Can't do. So sorry. Libby's not here any more. She quit Saturday."

"New job?"

"You've hit it. Brand new. It's a seven letter word that starts with M and ends with d. I mean, she's married."

McClain frowned. "You're serious?"

"As double typhoid. Libby's hitched to that shark from Chicago. She's Mrs. Pohler, take it or leave it."

"I ought to drop around and hand her congratulations. Where would I go to deliver them?"

"I know her old address," the redhead said slowly, "but she's probably not there now. When a gal gets married she begins housekeeping in a new place."

Mac had his own opinion of that. Guys like Pohler moved right in. They weren't particular about furnishing flats or renting hotel suites. If Libby had her own place and it was good enough for her, McClain thought, Pohler would figure it was good enough for him. Or, even if they had moved, there was a chance he could pick up a forwarding address from the old joint.

He had it the next minute, thanked the redhead, and at the corner beyond bought himself a taxi ride. It ended in front of an apartment house in the Sixties. It was a congested street with a riding academy on one side and the park beyond. The houses crowded in together, an assortment of cheap and middle-class apartments.

"Do I wait?" the hacker asked.

Mac gave him a handful of silver. "Roll."

Libby's name was printed in ink on a card in the slot over a brass letter-box in the vestibule. McClain did mental arithmetic and placed her suite as being one flight up. He tried the front door and found it unlocked. He went into a musty, carpeted hall.

From the looks of the dark oak woodwork, the plaster walls with decorations in bas relief, the building had been there when Dewey was giving Gridley a green light.

McClain pressed the bell of the former Miss Mason's apartment. The fact her name was still downstairs indicated his conclusions on Pohler were fairly correct. The guy from the Loop had moved in.

The door opened. Ernie Pohler in felt slippers, high-waisted gray serge trousers and a yellow sports shirt opened the door. He was tall and heavily made, as big as McClain, with an angular face and deep brown eyes. Not a bad-looking guy, clean and healthy, as if the air of Broadway agreed with him.

"Headquarters," McClain said briefly.

Pohler didn't have a gun on him. He nodded and opened the door wider. "Come in."

"Thanks."

Mac stepped into a small living room. It was typical of furnished apartment rentals in the neighborhood. His glance spotted a heap of new luggage piled against one wall. Expensive leathers.

"Sit down." Pohler was cool as ice. "What can I do for you?"

HE SAT on a green sofa between two windows. McClain took a chair opposite, that put his back to the open door that led to the rear of the apartment.

"You knew Lou Knight?" When Pohler nodded, Mac went on. "When did you see him last?"

"I don't know. Maybe Monday."

"Not last night?"

"I didn't see anybody last night. I wasn't feeling good. I was here from nine o'clock until ten this morning—in bed, with an ice bag on my forehead. My wife will verify."

Mac nodded. "Going somewhere?"

"Yeah, honeymoon. I got married the other day."

"So I understand." McClain leaned forward. "I've got a trip planned for you now. Down to Headquarters. Cap-

tain Mullin wants a word with you—about Knight."

The brown eyes narrowed slightly. "What about Knight?"

"That's what Mullin wants to know. Principally, why you gunned him. I'll go in with you while you put on your shoes and coat."

"Okay." Pohler got up. "But you're wasting your time." He took a step forward, stopped and then said through his teeth, "That's it, hon! Keep him lined!"

McClain moved his head slowly. He hadn't heard footsteps on the floor. His blue eyes riveted on the taffy-haired girl who stood behind him, covering him with a snub-nosed automatic.

"Well, you're certainly a soft walker." Mac laughed. "You'd better put that bang away before it goes off and hurts somebody."

Pohler crossed to her quickly and took the gun. "Nice work, hon. Go inside and finish dressing. I'll take care of this flatfoot."

Libby Pohler's violet-colored eyes widened. "I heard everything he said. They know, Ernie! Oh, you're in a jam! They'll burn you!"

Swift, expert fingers frisked McClain. Pohler took Mac's service gun from its shoulder clip, stuck it in the waistband of the gray trousers and went back to the sofa. The girl with the taffy hair leaned against the wall, trembling violently.

"I don't know what you think you're going to get by this," McClain said quietly. He reached in his pocket for a cigar. "I'll smoke while you think. Join me?"

He eased out the fat, oily cigar with the red band and tossed it over. Pohler caught it, smelled it and looked from Libby to the luggage and then to the door. He put the cigar in his mouth, bit off the end and smiled thinly.

"So Pete squawked. The rat! I told him if he opened his face I'd come back and drill my initials in his heart. I will—when I get finished with you."

"Ernie," the girl's voice shook. "You don't have to kill this cop! Can't you gag him, tie him up!"

"No chance." Pohler shook his head, still turning the unlighted cigar between his lips. "Burn for one, burn for two—three! We do business different where

I come from. Cops are like ants. You step on 'em when they get under your feet. Go and get dressed, hon."

"But they'll hear the shot and we'll never get away!"

"I've got a rod with a silencer in the bottom of one of those bags. Get it!"

MAC produced a paper of matches and struck one. "Light?" He held the match out while Pohler lit the fat cigar. "Let's sit down and talk about this. What have you got to gain by bumping me? Or Pete Grant? Or anybody else?"

"Lou welched and got his!" Pohler's tone was throaty. "The rat tried to take me for a grand. As if I didn't know crooked pasteboards when I felt them. And you're trying to take me for the rap. I cut Lou down with a hooded iron. You'll get the same."

The girl had opened one bag and was fumbling through shirts and pajamas. Mac began to sweat. He knew the symptoms of a cold-blooded killer when he saw them. This Ernie Pohler was packed with the maniacal lust for slaughter. Mac did some fast thinking while the girl spoke behind him:

"It's not in this bag, Ernie."

"Try the little one. It's in that. And shake it up. We can't wait all night." He leered over at McClain. "Pardon me, were you going to say something?"

Mac sat rigidly tense. One thing was sure. He wasn't going to stay put and be a clay pigeon for a silenced gun. He wasn't going to be knocked over by a small fry Illinois gunsels who was in a hurry to be off on his honeymoon.

Mac measured the distance from the chair to the green sofa. In quick order he placed the furniture on either side of him. The table with the pottery lamp. The door to the left. The windows. How much space there was in the center of the room. His big hands opened and closed as if flexing for the supreme moment that awaited them.

He had to act before Libby found what she was looking for. But he could not move until he got the right go-ahead. And that ought to come any minute. Any second.

He could feel sweat running down his chest under his crisp, white shirt. His heart quickened and tightened. His

throat seemed to open and close like a valve. He moved his feet on the thin rug, hoping his rubber heels would brace him. That he wouldn't slip.

The explosion came as Mac shot out of the chair.

The gat went off, the wild shot burrowing into the ceiling. Libby screamed. Mac's right cracked against Pohler's angular face. The blow was like the kick of a Missouri mule. Pohler thudded into the window and the glass broke with a splintering tinkle.

He lay half across the sill and lashed out with his felt-covered feet. Then the light snapped off.

Mac grabbed the guy from Chicago, taking a foot in the chest, and dragged him to the floor. They fought there, McClain on top, using all his power and skill. The door to the public hall opened, slammed shut. That was Libby taking a powder, Mac thought. Smart gal. No use of her sticking around and getting scooped up by the law.

Outside, somebody was blowing a police whistle. Doors were opening, people shouting. Pohler put everything in a last attempt to shake Mac off.

McClain got him by the throat and squeezed—hard.

Twenty minutes later two cops from a prowler car cruising the Park broke in. By that time Mac had Ernie Pohler ironed, the lights on and was using a towel on the Chicagoan's battered face. Then, the prowler car cops had hardly started asking questions before Captain Mullin and two of his squad heavy-footed in.

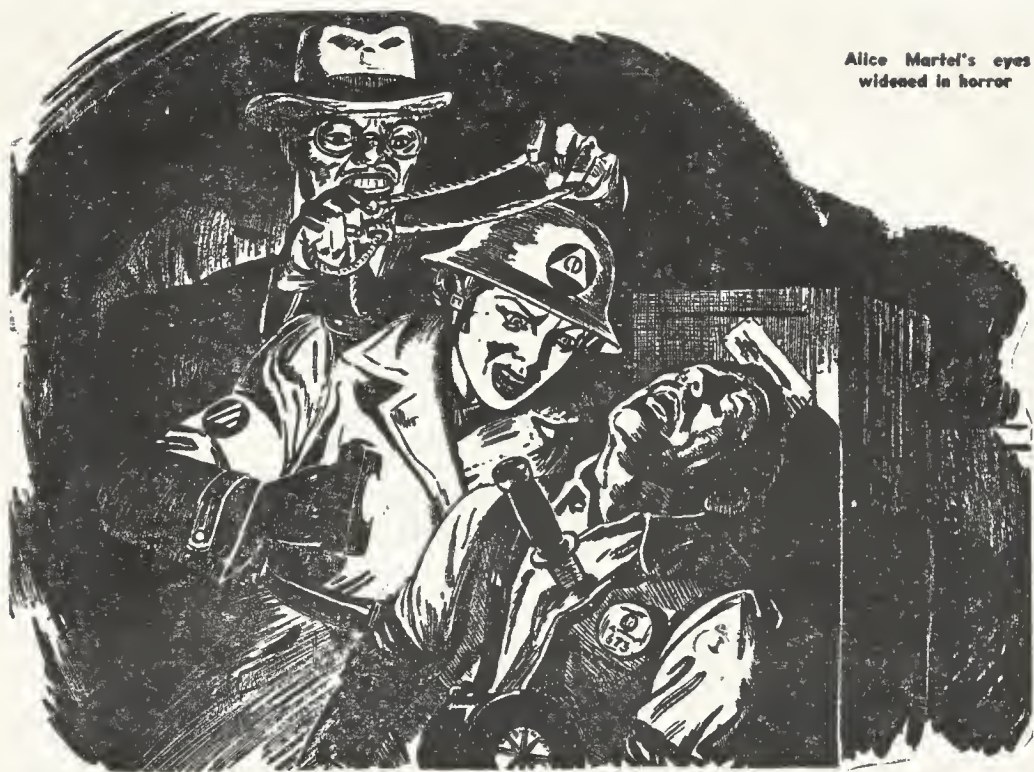
Regretfully, McClain looked at his broken battery of weeds. He emptied them out on a table and took the largest piece remaining. He popped that in his mouth and grinned at Mullin.

"There he is, Cap. Lou Knight's killer. He almost had me, too. Only I was smart enough to go primed for bear when I went out hunting him."

Mullin started. "Yeah? How?"

Pohler answered that through cracked and puffy lips. "The dirty rat! He gave me a loaded cigar! It almost blew my eyes out! I'll fix him for that! He can't do that to me and get away with it!"

McClain laughed. "Quite a card, isn't he?" He chuckled. "About the deuce of clubs, I'd say!"



Alice Martel's eyes
widened in horror

A Matter of Dialect

By SAMUEL MINES

Hoki Shigetsumi, murderous Jap saboteur intent on a vicious crime, plants a bomb that proves a boomerang!

HOKI SHIGETSUMI had never heard of Alice Martel and if he had, he would not have been impressed. A twenty-two-year-old blond stenographer, riding the BMT to work twice a day, an air-raid warden in Brooklyn in her spare time—she would not have seemed like a dangerous opponent to Hoki Shigetsumi.

For Hoki was a dangerous man. His record in China was deadly enough for him to have been picked for a mission which was almost suicide, yet glorious because of that. Moreover, it was important enough so that the Son of Heaven himself had blessed Hoki's mission. The Emperor God had solemnly

invoked his god ancestors to bring success to Hoki's task. That task was a one-man invasion of America to sabotage the demon Radar, whose fault it largely was that so many Japanese war-ships were now rusting at the bottom of the Pacific.

Hoki could speak English. Not perfectly, but that didn't matter since no Japanese could hope to disguise himself as an American anyway. Just so he could understand the country he was in.

Two years Hoki had waited for his chance. He had borne his internment in the California desert with patience. He had restrained his rage at the Nisei—the second generation Japanese who

were—amazingly—loyal to the country of their birth instead of to their God Emperor. With diabolical cunning, Hoki had even pretended to be one of them for the Japanese Intelligence had prepared his papers carefully enough to stand any investigation.

He had fooled both the FBI and the Nisei themselves. Which only proved, he thought contemptuously, that American-corrupted Japanese were just as foolish and soft as the Americans themselves.

So now, after two years, Hoki was released from the relocation center. Without trouble, he crossed the continent to New York. It was here that the factory making vital Radar parts was located and it was here that his memorized instructions led him.

The trail led to a section of Brooklyn where dingy factories and warehouses were creeping inexorably upon a residential district which continually retreated like a fussy old woman lifting her skirts and scurrying back at the advance of a mouse.

IT WAS in this residential district that Alice Martel lived and her beat as an air-raid warden overlapped the very block upon which the factory stood which was the goal of Hoki's two-year wait.

Studying a street map, he took a trolley car out towards the district. Across the aisle two middle-aged women were discussing the war.

"What I don't understand," said one heatedly, "is how we are supposed to catch any Jap spies if there are any around? Can you tell the difference between a Jap and a Chinaman, Margaret?"

"I declare," the other said timidly, "the place could be full of Japs and I wouldn't know it. Look," she nudged her companion surreptitiously, "that man there across the aisle—that Chinaman. What would you say he was?"

"A Filipino," the first woman said positively. "I knew a man whose cousin was in Manila and he told me exactly how to identify a Filipino."

Hoki did not permit himself even the luxury of a grin. Such childishness! No wonder the war went so gloriously for the inspired sons of Nippon.

He got off the car close to his desti-

nation and scouted the ground thoroughly. The factory was an unpretentious old brick building, but an armed guard stood at the door.

Hoki knew that his opportunity of getting in and dealing a sudden crippling blow might come unexpectedly, at any moment of the day or night. Therefore he planned to stay in the neighborhood continuously, watching.

For this, some sort of protective coloration would be needed. A stranger might be noted by the residents. Prowling the streets, getting the lay of the land firmly set in his mind, he saw something which rang a bell in his mind.

Halfway up the block was a Chinese laundry, owned by one Kee Sung. The words of the woman in the street car came back to his mind—"the place could be full of Japs and I wouldn't know it." Well, here was one Japanese who would not be visible.

After dark, Hoki dropped easily down the steps to the basement store and opened the door. Kee Sung, pushing an iron over a shirt halted his work and came forward. In Chinese, Hoki spoke.

"You are the Honorable Kee Sung?"

The laundryman's eyes flew open. What had puzzled a white woman hours earlier was all too plain to him.

"You are a Jap," he exclaimed.

"Do not be alarmed," Hoki purred. "I have come to bring you a message from your people in China. The Japanese military are treating them well, I assure you."

"You are enemy," Kee Sung stammered, retreating. "I will call a policeman."

Hoki leaped like a tiger. The hard edge of his hand drummed against Kee Sung's throat. Hoki caught him as he wilted. It had been done so quickly, that he was sure no one had seen from the street. A passerby would have to stoop down to look in, anyway. Holding the Chinese from sagging, he half carried, half dragged him quickly to the rear.

There was a bathroom here and Hoki dragged the unconscious man inside and levered him into the tub. He fitted the rubber stopper into place and turned on the water. Then he closed the door carefully and returned to the front. Hoki knew just how hard to

strike. He knew that Kee Sung would be drowned before he could regain consciousness.

He was placidly ironing shirts, an enormous pair of horn-rimmed spectacles on his nose, when Alice Martel came down the steps. She was wearing her white-painted helmet and a trench coat with her air-raid warden's armband. She carried a small lantern-type flashlight.

"Kee," she said, "there's going to be a test tonight. Did you fix—oh! You're not Kee Sung!"

"Sorry," Hoki said, bowing. "Kee Sung pay visit to relatives in Chinatown. Reave me in charge. You want shirts?"

"No—no thanks." Alice Martel frowned. "I'm the air-raid warden for this block. We're having a test tonight and I wanted to be sure Kee had his blackout shade fixed. It wasn't working right last time."

"I fix," Hoki said cheerfully. And recalling a choice bit of American idiom, he added rakishly, "reave it to me."

"All right," the girl said. "I'll be around again later."

BUT the sirens frustrated any later visit she might have planned. They began to moan just a few minutes later. In a flash, Hoki knew this was his opportunity. Luck—or the intercession of the gods—had sent him this test raid just when he needed it. For all he knew of American civilian defense, he might have had to wait weeks for another. But in the blackout he would find his chance.

Swiftly, Hoki put out the lights. They might think he was there, behind blackout shades, or think he had gone out, as they pleased. But he was going out.

He eased open the door and crept up the short flight of steps. People were hurrying past to get home, the wardens' whistles were shrilling and there were shouts of "Lights out!" at still bright windows. As he watched the street lights vanished suddenly and darkness wiped away all motion in the street. He could still hear the rapid tap of footsteps and far off the dipping beam of a flashlight in someone's hands.

He was filled with hard, excited exultation as he moved cautiously down the darkened street. To be seen by an air-

raid warden would mean disaster. No doubt the Americans imprisoned people for breaking rules, as they did in Japan. But he met nobody and the factory was only a block away.

He avoided the employees entrance. The armed guard was undoubtedly there, inside the doorway, since he would be forbidden on the street. Besides, the factory was working around the clock and it was no part of his plan to run into anyone.

But further up the block, closer to him, was the driveway used by delivery trucks. Hoki slid into the black yawning mouth of this driveway, feeling his way along the side of a truck standing there. He boosted himself up onto the loading platform.

It was completely dark. But his finger's explored the rough concrete wall until he found a door. Apparently work had been stopped by the sirens, for the door, though closed was not locked. In a moment he had eased his body inside.

He stood in darkness, but off somewhere was a dim glimmer of light and from this distant source he could see that he stood in an aisle of racked up packing cases. He bent down and carefully, shielding the light with his coat, risked a flash from his pencil light.

A single glance was all he needed. The cases were all consigned to units of the U. S. Navy and there was no doubt what they contained.

Now Hoki worked swiftly. From his coat he brought several long sticks of explosive, together with wires and a timing mechanism. His problem was to set the explosive so that the blast would encompass the maximum number of cases. He made his choice quickly.

But even as he was putting the wires into place he caught a glimmer of light from the corner of his eye and a moment later heard footsteps. He ducked down behind a packing case, peered out cautiously. A watchman was coming, flashing his light ahead of him.

For a moment it seemed as if he would pass by. Then his light caught the wires, steadied and clung. It traveled to the sticks of dynamite. Hoki heard his breath catch in a gasp. He was opening his mouth to yell when Hoki threw the knife.

His aim was a little high, the blade caught the watchman high on the

breast where there is a hard shell of bone rather than lower in the soft stomach or the ribs. But the man went down, his shout strangled to a gurgle in his throat.

Hoki dragged him back, propped him against a packing case. Then he turned to his wiring again. But when he glanced around at the watchman he saw the man was not dead, but was trying to crawl away.

An idea came to the Jap. He sought and found some rope lying on one of the cases and with it, tied the watchman firmly and again propped him against one of the cases. When the Americans found parts of his body scattered around their demolished cases they would have another little puzzle to worry over.

Swiftly he finished the wiring, set the time mechanism to go off in twenty minutes. The test raid should take at least half an hour, that meant nobody would be likely to come in here before then, and gave him time to get away. And then, just as he thought his job was done, there was a sound behind him!

LIKE a snake, Hoki slithered behind a packing case. He was none too soon. A flashlight clicked on and in its reflected glow he saw the helmeted figure of the girl, the air-raid warden who had spoken to him earlier that evening.

Alice Martel advanced cautiously down the aisle between the rows of packing cases. She was palpably scared, the light shook in her hand. But she came on steadily.

To his fright, Hoki saw that in a mo-

ment her light would fall on the trussed up body of the watchman with the knife still embedded in his breast. He fumbled around and found an end of the rope he had used. Swiftly he fashioned it into a noose.

Alice Martel's light fell upon the watchman. Her eyes widened in sheer horrified shock, her lips parted soundlessly. In a moment she would scream, but in that moment Hoki rose up behind her and his noose dropped over her head.

There was no mercy in him, that noose would have twisted the life out of her in seconds. But even as it tightened, even as the first strangled gasp came from her throat, the lights went on dazzlingly in the room. There was a rush of feet behind Hoki, a shout, and then the skies fell on him.

He recovered consciousness to the steady sound of voices.

"—identify him positively," Alice Martel was saying. "He was in that laundry and that makes him the murderer of Kee Sung as well as the watchman."

"Well, he won't murder anyone else," a man's voice said grimly. "And thanks to your call, we got there in time to yank those wires loose from his bomb—not to mention saving your life."

Hoki sat up groggily. He was lying on a couch and he was surrounded by blue-coated police. His hands were cuffed behind him.

"So you're awake, are you, Jap?" a policeman said.

"Prease," Hoki said wildly, "is some mistake. I am Chinese, not Jap!"

"Save your breath," the cop said.

(Concluded on page 96)

"IS GOD DEAD?"

This is a natural question these days. But the answer is "NO." Certainly not. Every thinking American knows that. But there is something radically wrong with our ideas of God. There must be, and there is. We have known for some time that this world never yet has had the Power of God disclosed to it. Theories of God . . . ? yes, thousands of them. But no Power.

This is not as it should be. Right-thinking men and women everywhere should be able to use the Power of God against such mad world marauders as the Axis leaders. But they can't do it. Therefore, the truths of the powerful existence of God are not known. May we say to you with absolute assurance that there does exist, here and now, an invisible spiritual Power which is God, and which you may use any time you care to? We know whereof we speak. An abundance

of evidence has come to us, proving beyond a shadow of doubt that man can, here and now, draw upon a vast ocean of Power which is God.

We want you to know how to discover and use the Power of God. To help you find this Power, we will do everything in our power. Send us your name and address and we will send you enough free material to convince you that we know what we are talking about. If your experience is like that of scores of thousands of others, there will come into your life the most dazzling, scintillating Power you can ever know—the Power of God.

Send your name and address to "Psychiana" Inc., Dept. 211, Moscow, Idaho, and your free information will come to you as fast as we can get it in the mail. The address again—"Psychiana" Inc., Dept. 211, Moscow, Idaho. Copyright 1943, "Psychiana" Inc.

(Adv.)

*A Complete
Novelet*



Linkhart reached for the gun, and so did I

DEATH WITH MUSIC

By C. S. MONTANYE

*Johnny Castle steps into a puzzling maze of criminal intrigue
when he sets out to probe a grim hot spot murder mystery!*

CHAPTER I

SWELL NIGHT FOR MURDER

BROADWAY had all the flash, sparkle and brilliance of a backwoods town buried deep in the sticks. Under the dimout regulations Dream Street looked like the main thoroughfare in Podunk. And to make it worse the sky was conspiring with the War Department.

There wasn't a moon or the glimmer of a star anywhere. The whole set-up was dark as the Cotton Club's beauty chorus.

I cut from the main boulevard, east

through Fifty-first Street, heading for that resort of pleasure known to all and sundry as the Tallyho. This was a popular night-spot. One of the better columnists often referred to it as a "concentration camp with a floor show."

The Tallyho was owned and operated by Alf Linkhart, a smart hustler who knew all the angles and most of the answers.

As first string sports writer on the *Orbit* I had been tipped off that afternoon that Silk McCall, a fight manager of some prominence, was about to make a deal with Andy Best to purchase Patsy Keegan, a promising young welter-



weight. As Keegan was right in line for a crack at the title—and figured to have a better than even chance to wrap it up—the thing was news.

I knew McCall usually hung out at the Tallyho. In fact, a phone call to the Orient Athletic Club, where Silk's sockers trained, brought the information that McCall was at his favorite dive.

The Tallyho graced the center of the street. It was on the north side. Its big Neon sign had been turned off.

HEAVY draperies muffled all the windows. Only "Seven," the colored doorman on duty, was the same. Seven, in his gold-braided uniform, with teeth that lighted up the gloom like hundred-watt Mazdas, flashed them at me as I cantered up.

"It's Mistuh Castle, sho' enuf," he greeted me. "Yo' ain't been around fo' quite a while."

"Sho' enuf," I said. "How's the ivory stock market?"

"Fair to middlin', suh."

"Silk McCall inside?" I asked.

"Yes, suh."

Seven opened the door and I exchanged darkness for light.

Sunburst Alley might have changed on the exterior but inwardly the Tallyho was just the same. The same rococo and cheap gilt decorations. The same tables, stamp-size dance floor, hot band and smoke haze.

Also, noise.

I had just finished trading my ten-dollar felt for a brass check when Alf Linkhart, owner of the Tallyho and expug, came down a flight of stairs that emptied into the right side of the foyer. He was a worried-looking fat guy, with a broken nose and twisted ears. His complexion, strictly Ossining, N. Y., was a hangover from a six-year vacation he

I saw Putzi's eyes shift
to a point over my left
shoulder



had once taken there at the Government's expense.

Linkhart saw me and headed over.

"Well, if it ain't Johnny Castle. You haven't been around in a long time. How's tricks, kid?"

I got to the point. "I understand Silk McCall's here."

Linkhart's small, slatted eyes retreated under their creepy lids.

"Could be. I ain't noticed him. You sure he's around, Johnny?"

"I was told that," I said. "By your own doorman."

"Stick around and I'll ask Ben."

Ben was Benny Grant, a small, dapper little man with false teeth and a smile to match. He managed the Tallyho for Alf Linkhart and also doubled in the rôle of headwaiter. Linkhart went between the heavy draperies and into the main part of the place. He had hardly left before the door of a phone booth, on

the south side of the foyer, opened and a red-headed girl stepped out.

She was in a costume that marked her as being part of the floor show's dancing line, consisting of some glittering green-blue spangles and net. A little here, a little there. The gal was a looker. Her profile was swell—all the way down.

Yet I could see there was something on her mind, something that made her delicately arched brows draw together and stay that way. She stood there, looking at nothing, while she nervously chewed her lower lip. Just then Linkhart came back.

"Hello, Putzi. What are you doing around front?"

"I had to make a phone call."

"Better watch the time," Linkhart said. "You go on in a couple of minutes." He shifted his cigar. "By the way, meet Johnny Castle. He writes pieces for the paper. Johnny, this is Putzi Russell."

"Hello." I nodded to the girl. "Glad to know you."

She looked at me without much interest and nodded back.

The shaded lights fell on her red-gold hair, pointing it up with gleams of fire. They made the green-blue spangles shimmer. I noticed her skin was like smooth satin and her eyes a deep, lovely shade of blue.

THE girl said something about having to duck and vanished through a door which I happened to know led down to the basement dressing rooms.

"I can't find Ben Grant," Linkhart said to me. "He's probably downstairs. I left word for him to come up here."

I hardly heard what Linkhart said.

"Putzi Russell?" I stared at the door the green-blue spangles had faded through. "New, isn't she?"

Linkhart nodded, clearing his throat. "I grabbed her out of one of these dance dens. You know, rumba in six lessons. South American stuff—like bananas. She was one of the lady teachers. Imagine! A fancy babe like her pushing Bronx bookkeepers around at so much a tangle!"

He laughed and went in between the coatroom counter and the cigar stand where the door of his office backed up.

I pushed the draperies aside. The restaurant was fairly well crowded and the floor show was about to commence. I recognized Cary Blynn, one of Tin Pan Alley's dime-a-dozen pianists as he sidled out and took his place in front of a baby grand.

Blynn was a nice-looking boy, tall and smooth. He wore his blond hair long and brushed back. A white dinner coat and blue trousers set him off to perfection. I'd overheard that Blynn was terrific with the ladies. He couldn't have had more dames flocking around him if he had been a basement bargain sale.

Blynn rippled the vamp of some new tune. An orange spotlight hissed down from the battery of balcony lights and a girl stepped out and into its glare.

She was very dark, very sleek, with blazing black eyes and a mouth as red as a Connecticut barn.

It didn't take much Broadway knowledge to peg her as Lolita Diaz, a recent import from Rio.

Somebody tapped me on the shoulder

and I turned around. Ben Grant showed me his phony choppers in a broad grin. "Silk's upstairs in Room Two-A, Mr. Castle."

"Thanks," I said.

It was a cute song. Lolita knew how to put it over. She gave it all she had and a little more, smiling at her accompanist while he smiled back at her. I hung around until it ended. Four babes with bare stems breezed out for a rhythm grind and I started up the stairs.

I couldn't explain it, but a funny feeling began to grow in the pit of my stomach.

Twice before, in the past, I'd had it. Once, the night a couple of expert targeteers from Toledo wandered into a Second Avenue drinkery and just for fun shot the joint up.

And once on an icy morning when a taxi I rode went into a skid and headed for an El pillar. It missed but stopped halfway through the front window of a delicatessen store.

I remembered picking salami out of my hair and brushing off potato salad until the medico, on the rear of an ambulance that clanged up, told me I was all right.

My scalp crawled and for no reason at all the palms of my hands began to get damp. Downstairs, the beat of the band died to a thin, monotonous note—a continual thumping like the pound of my heart.

The corridor was dimly lighted. On either side of it were private supper rooms. Sometimes speculators used them for card games. Occasionally, suckers were lured into them and clipped. Now, I saw most of the rooms were empty, with the doors standing half ajar.

I LOOKED at the numbers as I went along and found that 2A was at the end of the hall.

There was a light over the transom, a sliver of gold along the sill. I expected to hear Silk McCall's high, whining voice on the other side of the door. McCall was a great talker.

Over at Jacobs Beach they had a saying that McCall could talk a cripple out of his crutches.

I remember what had brought me to the Tallyho. I had known McCall for

quite a while. I'd always given him a break in my sheet and he appreciated it. So much so that when anything important came up he let me have it exclusive. If he were angling for Keegan I'd know about it.

I tapped on the door.

Ben Grant hadn't mentioned who was with Silk McCall, but it was a cinch it would be "Red" Herrin, one of McCall's ex-heavyweights. For some time Herrin had been all through as a leather dispenser. Lately, he had been playing bodyguard to his boss. Why Silk McCall, a friendly guy, needed a strongarm everywhere he went, was one for the book.

There was no answer to my knock. I gave the panels another rap. Still no answer. I dropped a hand to the knob and turned it.

The door opened and I walked in on murder!

Silk McCall, on his back, sprawled on the carpet, half under a table, half out in the open. He was dead, all right. What made him that way was the knife with the ebony handle protruding from almost the exact center of his chest.

All around McCall was an ooze of crimson. From the look of the blood I figured he hadn't been knocked out very long.

I shut the door with a foot and took in the details of the room. Nothing was disturbed to indicate brawling. An eight-ounce bar glass stood on the table, the ice still melting in it. It was my guess that McCall's death was as much a complete surprise to him as it was to me.

I stood looking down at him. The music drifted faintly up. So far as I knew McCall wasn't the kind who had a lot of enemies on his tail.

Who and why? I must have stood there another minute before something caught my eye.

I followed the glitter of it along the floor and found it a foot away from where Silk lay, under the table.

It was a green-blue spangle that glinted and sparkled like a diamond in the room's light.

I held it in the palm of my hand, thinking hard.

Then I put the spangle in my handkerchief, opened the door and went downstairs.

CHAPTER II

FOR THE LAW



LF LINKHART took the news hard. He mumbled two words around the cigar in his mouth.

"Silk—killed!" he exclaimed.

"If he isn't," I said, "he's giving a pretty good imitation of a stiff with a shiv in him."

Linkhart pawed at me. "Wait a minute, Johnny! What are you going to do?"

"Give the police something to worry about," I said, and ducked into the phone booth.

I watched Linkhart through the glass door while I eased the call through to Centre Street and the proper parties. McCall's demise had shaken Linkhart down to his reclaimed rubber heels. He looked flabby and flattened. The Sing-Sing pallor turned from a rich cream to skimmed milk. His hands were shaking like a line of wash on a windy Monday.

"This'll ruin me," he bleated, when I hung up and stepped out of the booth. "They'll snatch my license! What with gas and rationing, I'm having a tough time getting by. This'll wash me up and wipe me off."

"That was Captain Fred Mullin, of the Homicide Squad, on the wire. He'll be up here before you can say 'What's the motive?' He passed out some advance official instructions. The law says nobody is to go in that room or touch anything until he arrives."

Linkhart shivered. "Ruined! Closed up! I might as well find a dock and jump in!"

The floor show chorus was warbling a hot number. I pushed the curtains aside and stared. Twelve not-so-bad-looking girls were cavorting in the cleared space beyond the tables. It wasn't hard to pick out Putzi Russell. I saw her red-gold head on the right end of the dancing line.

All the costumes, if you wanted to call them that, were alike except for the color of the spangles. And Putzi's, I noticed, was the only one that matched up with the spangle wrapped in my handkerchief.

The girls danced off and sirens wailed out on Fifty-first Street. The front door

of the Tallyho opened. Captain Mullin with two plainclothesmen in tow loomed up in the doorway.

Over their assorted shoulders I caught a brief glimpse of Seven's dusky face. The eyes of the dice expert resembled a pair of hard-boiled eggs looking for two slices of bread.

"Shut that door and lock it," Mullin directed briskly. "Stay and cover it, Larry." He turned to Linkhart. "I've got a squad around the building. Nobody gets out of here until I give the okay. Where's the body?"

"Upstairs," Linkhart choked.

"Who found it? Who phoned me?"

"I did—both items," I said.

Captain Mullin stabbed me with a couple of pale, suspicious eyes. He was a short, stocky man, hard as nails all over. A typical old-time, club-swinging, knock-down-drag-out copper, Mullin had come up the tough way—from a beat on Staten Island to the captaincy of the Homicide Squad.

Mullin didn't go in for fancy detecting, but he usually got plenty of results by his own methods.

"You," he said shortly, and there was a universe of meaning in the one word.

Mullin and I didn't sing any close harmony duets. Once, early in his career as Lieutenant, he had tried to close up a certain fight club, claiming it was a gambling dive. It happened that a couple of floaters, entirely unrelated to the place, had drifted in and staged a card game. The close was so unfair that I had written about it in the *Orbit*, slapping on plenty of indignation.

THE charges had been squashed, and Broadway had enjoyed a laugh at Mullin's expense.

Like elephants, the captain had a good memory. I knew he had had it in for me, trying to even off. I had hit him in his vanity, the worst possible place, for Mullin had no sense of humor. He didn't like folks snickering at him.

We went upstairs.

I opened the door of Room 2A, and Mullin walked in slowly. His gaze shifted from the late Mr. McCall to the furnishings of the room and then back to me.

"When did you find him?"

"A few minutes before I buzzed Headquarters."

"What did you bump him for?" Mullin growled. "What did he ever do to you?"

"Not a thing," I said. "That's why I didn't kill him."

Mullin's colorless eyes focused on the disturbed Alf Linkhart. "You kill him?"

"Not me." Alf shook his head violently. "Silk was a pal of mine. One of my best customers. Would I be crazy enough to murder customers who come in here and spend money?"

Mullin knelt beside the corpse. He threw a handkerchief over the handle of the knife and drew it out slowly, inch by inch. In the light the long blade glistened wetly.

Mullin studied the murder weapon for a moment, put it on the table and shrugged.

"That shiv was in for keeps. He must have gone out in a hurry. How long has he been here? What time did he come in?" Mullin fired the questions fast at Linkhart. "Come on, speak up."

Alf Linkhart did.

McCall, alone, had entered the Tallyho at twenty-five minutes after nine. He had told Linkhart he expected a friend. He asked for an upstairs room and Linkhart sent a waiter up to 2A with him.

"He ordered a single Scotch. That's all I know about him until Castle, here, came down and told me Silk was all through."

I raised an ear and an eye at Linkhart's new version of McCall's presence. A while ago Alf Linkhart had pretended he didn't know if Silk was on the premises.

"So you were the party he expected?" Mullin said to me.

"Wrong," I answered. "He didn't expect me. He was to meet Andy Best here. Silk wanted to proposition Best and take over Patsy Keegan's contract."

"Where's Best?"

"Apparently he didn't show up, Captain," I said.

"Get the waiter who served McCall," Mullin ordered.

The waiter appeared a few minutes later. The sight of the object on the floor did things to his complexion and digestion. He turned a delicate pea-green and began to burp.

"What do you know about this?" Mullin asked.

"Not much, sir. The boss told me to take the gentleman up here. He said, 'Scotch' and I went down to the bar to get it. When I brought it up he was sitting in that chair, with a lot of papers on the table beside him, sort of reading through them."

"You didn't come in again after you served his drink?"

"No, sir."

"That's all." Mullin rubbed his chin. "Lot of papers, eh?" he said, after the waiter blew.

MULLIN knelt again and began searching through McCall's clothes. He pulled out a couple of letters, a wallet well-lined with dough, a bunch of keys, two packs of cigarettes and matches.

But there were no papers.

Mullin skimmed through the sheaf of money in Silk's poke.

"Almost four Gs. That's a lot of coin."

"I told you he was angling to buy Keegan's contract," I put in. "That would take a lot of dough."

Mullin made a routine inspection of the room. He raised the window and looked out. When he closed it Ed Wheeler, one of his plainclothesmen, came in with a wine card that had a lot of writing on the back.

"I jotted down a quick list of the guys in the main room that you might want to talk to."

Mullin nodded. "Send them up one at a time. Who've you got first?"

"Corbin, the bookie."

"Fine." Mullin smacked his lips. "It'll be a pleasure to rake that sharpshooter. Go get him." Then the cold eyes flickered in my direction. "That's all, Castle. If I want you I'll call you. But don't go traveling for a few days and don't tell me you couldn't get to the Battery because you've got an A card."

I hesitated.

After all, it wasn't my affair. Why not hand Mullin the green-blue spangle and let him take it from there? Something checked me. I couldn't figure what it was. Maybe two lovely blue eyes. Maybe highlighted hair, soft and shiny—or two tempting red lips.

I wanted to stick around and listen in on Putzi Russell's answer to the captain's questions, but Mullin had other ideas.

"What are you waiting for, Castle—a good-by kiss?" he asked me.

Larry Hartley stepped aside when I went downstairs. I walked out into the dark of Fifty-first Street, continued on as far as Sixth Avenue and turned into a beer stube.

Propped up at the end of the bar I toyed with a beaker of brew, my mind working hard.

The spangle sparkled in my handkerchief when I opened it up. I frowned at it. The girl with the blue eyes had been in Room 2A that evening. Why? What for? I remembered her troubled look when she stepped out of the phone booth in the foyer. Slowly, I folded the handkerchief in half and put it back in my pocket.

After thinking things over I had decided to horn in on the McCall killing. I believed I had three good reasons. I chalked them up in order of importance.

My main reason was that first, last, and in the middle, I was a newspaperman, with the best interests of my sheet at heart. If I could find and put the digit on Silk McCall's killer, and give it to the *Orbit*, so much the better.

My next reason was, it would be a pleasure to tangle with Captain Mullin again, and find out if the stuff above my eyebrows was still as good as his—or better.

My final reason concerned what might be classified as a sudden cardiac disturbance. It was cockeyed, building up a split-second interest in a dame whose nod to me had been as cold as a polar bear's paw. But there it was and I didn't argue.

SUMMED up, I saw I could toss out Reasons One and Two and still be half-witted enough to go ahead on my own.

My first stop was the Orient Athletic Club across town. That was the gym where Silk McCall's boys trained. It was late and I didn't expect to find anyone on deck. I didn't—except for a night watchman.

"All locked?"

"Tight as a drum."

"Where does Herrin hang out after hours?"

I lined the question with a dollar bill. The watchman palmed it, pondered and let go with some tobacco juice.

"Red? He lives with Mr. McCall. At the Hotel Reginald."

Of course. Being Silk's strongarm, Herrin would be camped in at the fight manager's home address.

A clock-ark buzzed me across town and uptown again to the Reginald. It was in the Forties, a rock's heave from Lexington Avenue. There was no one around except the night clerk doing a crossword puzzle at the desk.

He listened, then spoke. "Mr. Herrin isn't in. I know that. Somebody called the suite twice in the last hour." He glanced at the rack back of him. "There's McCall's key."

"Much obliged," I said, and laid leather on the sidewalk, outside, again.

Captain Mullin had evidently finished quizzing the customers at the Tallyho and had let them go. They were filing out singly and in pairs when I gave Fifty-first Street a playback. I noticed the medical examiner's car standing behind one of the prowls. The morgue wagon came around the corner and Silk McCall went away in a basket.

I camped in the vestibule of a furnished rooming house on the south side of the street and watched.

The girls of the floor show came out and hurried away. I looked for Putzi Russell, but didn't recognize her. I didn't think I would—with her clothes on, in the dark. More time passed and then Mullin, Hartley and some plainies tumbled out and the prowl car whined off.

I figured Mullin had left a cop on duty; that didn't check me. I hadn't been an old-time patron of the Tallyho for nothing. There was an alley on the east side of the building. In the Prohibition era, when the spot had been a speak, the beverages used to be delivered down that alley.

I followed it along until I came to the door at its end.

It was locked, but didn't take a lot of trouble to open. The blade of my penknife moved the catch back and a shoulder did the rest. I walked into smelly darkness.

A lighted match showed me a flight of stairs. These led from the cellar to the dressing rooms. At the far end of the hall a couple of dim lights had been left burning. I padded along the cement until I reached the same door Putzi

Russell had used earlier that evening to fade through.

Now I had to be careful. Mullin's watchdog, in all likelihood, was planted in the foyer. Or was he? I inched the door open and gave the foyer a gander.

Luck was good. It was deserted.

A light seeped out of Linkhart's office. Someone was moving around in there. I tossed a quick look at the stairs and tiptoed fast to the door between the cigar counter and the coatroom wicket.

ALF LINKHART, at his desk, jerked his head up when I slid in and quietly shut the door behind me.

He still looked like a lump of putty. But his slatted eyes were bright and dangerous when they fastened on me. He opened the top drawer of the desk and—reached.

So did I!

My fingers wound over his wrist. I put on the pressure and helped myself to the blue-black automatic Linkhart had grabbed for. He quieted down when I let him look into the muzzle.

"Where's Mullin's man?" I asked.

"Upstairs."

"No capers, Linkhart," I warned. "You were as phony as the Bell System tonight. I want a clean bill. If I don't get it I'll spill plenty to the captain. You know what I mean. You were upstairs with McCall just before I came in."

Linkhart's shapeless mouth twisted. I kept watching his hands. I didn't want any more drawers opening, guns popping out. Alf Linkhart had a swell excuse for drilling me. He could blow me open and tell Mullin I was Silk McCall's murderer.

The cops would love it that way. A quick crack for what looked like a tough nut and no questions asked or answered!

"What do you want?" Linkhart growled.

"How far are you in on this?" I leaned across the desk. "For my dough you're the party who jabbed Silk with the steel."

Linkhart shook his head. "You're wrong, Johnnuy. Murder ain't up my alley."

"What did Mullin find out?"

Linkhart relaxed a trifle. I put his gun in my pocket and a hand over it. His slatted eyes kept watching the pocket.

"Nothing—much."

"Was Andy Best here tonight?"

"Not that I know of."

"You've got an angle," I insisted.

For the first time he smiled. "Mebbe yes, mebbe no. Why all the interest, Johnny? You ain't a copper—what business is this of yours?"

"I've declared myself in. Just because and for instance. Who killed McCall—if you didn't, Alf?"

"You figure it. I'm not talking."

I moved in closer. He sat there, his chins pushed up by his collar, looking like a creamy balloon that would sst out at the prick of a pin.

"No gab?"

"I'll tell you this much," he said earnestly. "This is one for the law to handle, Johnny. Look, you take my advice and leave it alone. Otherwise, you might get your good-looking pan bent out of shape. See what I mean?"

"For the law?" I said. "Okay. Now tell me where I can find Putzi Russell. Or don't you know that one, either?"

"Putzi? Easy to answer. She has a room at the Burgoyne."

"I'll take this up with you later, pal," I said and backed toward the door.

Linkhart didn't move. He kept his gaze on the pocket while I opened the door and went through it.

The foyer outside was still empty as any last year's love nest. I drifted rapidly out of the Tallyho by the same way I had come in.

Ten minutes later a cab dropped me at the Burgoyne.

CHAPTER III

NIGHT RIDE



THE hotel was medium class. Perhaps a notch lower. It got most of its play from the theater crowd, the Times Square element, so-callers there at any time of the day or night weren't unusual.

The elevator hoisted me to the second floor. There was only one corridor which split the building in the middle. Two long straight lines of numbered rooms lined the hall on either side.

As I got out of the lift a door opened and a tall, good-looking guy came walking down the hall. He didn't wear a hat. His blond hair was brushed back and

half a glance tabbed him as Cary Blynn, the piano player at the Tallyho.

"Down!" Blynn called out, when he saw the descending elevator.

When he had gone I went on to the door he had come from. The girl with the blue eyes and the red-gold hair opened at my first knock. It was Putzi Russell.

Maybe she thought it was Blynn stopping back for something.

"Oh!"

I walked into a good-sized bedroom-living room. There was a lot of furniture around. The only thing of interest around there for me was Putzi in a glamorous velvet robe that fit like her skin. At close range, with the make-up off, she was even more attractive—younger and cuter—than she had been at the night-spot.

"Remember me, Miss Russell?"

She drew the broad sash a little tighter about her curved figure. I looked deep into her eyes. A girl with eyes like hers couldn't be guilty—of anything! Anything, that is, outside of possessing deadly weapons. And what I gazed into were twice as dangerous as the gat in my pocket.

"You're Mr. Castle."

She had perfume on her hair. When she came closer I breathed it in. I wondered what business had brought Cary Blynn to see her here. Business concerning McCall and Room 2A?

It looked that way to me.

"I want to talk to you," I began.

"About what?"

"Silk McCall's sudden death."

A pulse throbbed in her throat. The lamplight turned her hair to burnished gold. Slender fingers played with the tassels of the sash, making them swing, pendulum-like.

"You're a copper?"

"Wrong. Newspaper. I want to help you. Maybe you don't know it but you're in a spot—if Mullin finds out—things."

Her eyes widened. "What kind of—things?"

"Information. That you were in Room 2A tonight at the Tallyho. That you were with McCall—when he was dead or when he was alive. You didn't tell Mullin that when he questioned you."

The red lips parted. In the room adjoining, a card game was going on, and

the grumble of voices and the clink of chips crept in through the transoms.

I noticed she had stopped swinging the sash ends.

"What makes you think I was in that room, Mr. Castle?"

"You left something. Luckily, I found it before the police did."

I opened the handkerchief and showed her the green-blue spangle. The same troubled look she had worn out of the telephone booth came back to shadow her pretty face.

"What do you want me to tell?" Her voice was low and strained.

"Who finished Silk?"

"I don't know!" I heard the quick breath she drew. "Really, I don't know."

"You were in that room. You saw him."

SHE didn't hesitate. "Yes, I saw him. He was alive then. I slipped upstairs because I wanted to talk to Silk."

"What about?"

I felt like a Centre Street bully, putting on the clamp, but I had to play it through. Mullin was nobody's fool. Somebody else at the Tallyho might know about Putzi Russell's visit to 2A. I had to help her. And to do it I had to be tough.

"I can't tell you." Her look was tragic. She was either putting on a good act or I was wringing her out. "I swear I had nothing to do with his murder! I swear I don't know who did it! He was alive when I left him."

I believed her.

"Did you see anyone else up there? Anyone in the room, or the corridor? Anybody pass you?"

She shook her head. "Nobody."

"What about Blynn? I saw him a few minutes ago, outside. What was he doing here?"

She was standing, facing me. My back was to the door. I saw her eyes switch from my face and shift swiftly to a point over my left shoulder. That should have been enough warning.

But it wasn't. Neither was the draft I felt blowing against my ankles or the steps on the carpet—behind me.

Quick, gliding, catlike steps that stopped abruptly.

Then Putzi Russell, the room, the lights and everything else—including myself—went out. . . .

I must have been away for quite a while. When I finally broke through, I woke up lying on a blanket on a stone floor.

The first thing I saw—when objects took shape out of the nebulous haze—were feet. Two pairs of feet in shoes that had been purchased a long time before you needed a coupon to get them.

They belonged to a couple of shabby roughs who were sitting at a table playing cards. I had a worm's-eye view of them, an earful of their moronic chatter.

From the repartee I gathered that one was Sam and the other Steve.

Steve was big, built like a bridge, with a lantern jaw. That probably explained why his face lighted up every so often. Sam was shorter, but no less husky. Neither was familiar.

I looked at my surroundings. They certainly didn't resemble the Burgoyne. All concrete. Floor, walls and ceiling of the small room were stone. I had never seen this place before. The light came from a dangling, shaded bulb suspended over the table where they played with the pasteboards.

I felt like something that had stepped out of an electric fan. My head ached dully and my mouth tasted like a musty cellar smells.

"Ten of twelve." Sam slapped the last card down and yawned.

"That's three bucks fifty you owe me," said Steve.

"I know. We move at twelve. Let's kick the sucker awake."

Steve turned to drop his cigarette and grind a heel on it. He saw me looking at him and grinned.

"He's out of it."

"Yeah?"

Sam came over and they both looked down at me. From my position on the blanket they seemed about seven or eight feet tall.

"On your pins, punk!" Steve ordered.

I DODGED his brogan and got up. The stone room rocked a little. So did I. Sam shoved me up against a wall. He reached out and picked up a piece of thin rope hanging over the back of a chair.

"Turn around and put your hands behind your back."

He knotted the rope around my wrists. I used the old Hegeman trick of

throwing out the joints so, when the final knot was tied, there was slack when I pulled them in.

"What's the idea?" I inquired mildly.

Neither bothered to answer. Sam, meanwhile, had whipped out a dirty bandanna. He folded it into a hood and tied it over my eyes.

Then somebody stuck a gun in my back.

"Start walkin'."

I did.

Damp cold hit me in the face. The gun urged me forward, I stumbled down some steps and across a stone floor. From the sharp smell of gasoline and the slip of oil under my soles I figured I was in a garage.

"Climb in!"

I was pushed through a door and onto the rear seat of a car. Another man was

as I was at the intrusion. Then—who had sent the huskies around to pick me up?

After a while I thought I had the answer. What was the matter with Linkhart for an angle? Alf, and no one else, knew I was on my way to the Russell girl's address.

I was confident I hadn't been tailed at any stage of the short trip from the Tallyho to the Burgoyne.

So it must be Linkhart. Okay. What about it? A lot about it! Since he wanted me dealt with, it looked like Alf Linkhart was nervous. Nervous about the things I'd told him I was going to do. Nervous enough to want me out of the picture.

"Fair enough, Mr. Linkhart," I said to myself. "There's no harm in trying!"

A half-hour must have passed. The



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MURDER IN MINK by C. S. MONTANYE

sitting there—waiting for me. I floundered around. He grabbed my arm and jerked me forward.

He slammed me back against the upholstery.

Then an overhead steel door thundered up and the car rolled out.

I hadn't any idea where I was. A few minutes later I imagined we were on an express highway. There were no lights to slow us down or stop us. Not much traffic, either. Only occasionally I heard the whirr of a car going by.

My head began to clear. I began to think better. I didn't like it. The car and the guys in it bore too much of a resemblance to the good old carefree gang days when you were taken out for a ride and seldom brought home.

My mind went back to the room at the Burgoyne.

I was sure Putzi had no part in the snatch. She had been just as surprised

car began to slow. It went off the smooth cement and bumped over car tracks.

"About a mile. Take the first turn to your left," the voice of Sam said.

A mile. The last mile, maybe. The final mile for John Castle.

It was all or nothing!

I had worked the thin rope off my wrists, keeping my hand behind my back to make it look good. Now I pulled them out into full view. I had to show them, to pull off the bandanna. Jerking it away, I staked everything on speed. Speed and the element of surprise. I nailed the man on the cushions beside me with a short left that had everything I owned behind it. It tipped him back and dropped him, head down, on the floor.

STRANGELY, as he slid off the seat, my fingers brushed the coat he was wearing. The material of it felt like

warm moss, soft and spongy. Funny material to make a coat of, but I wasn't thinking of that then.

I got the door beside me open with my right hand before the two monkeys in the front were aware of what had been going on.

Sam turned, just as I got the door unlatched. I hit him so hard with my left fist that I thought I'd broken it. He yelped, but I didn't wait to hear Steve's reply. I fell out on the road, the car going on a short way before the brakes thudded.

In the pale moonlight I saw a fringe of woods close by.

Picking myself up, and paying no attention to the blast of fire and the slug that whistled past, I headed for the trees.

I'm sure that Alsab, in his match with Whirlaway, never turned it on the way I did. More slugs sizzled by, but all they did was to make me go faster—toward the woods—toward safety!

CHAPTER IV

FROM HEADQUARTERS



GENERALLY speaking, Bill Jamison had handled the McCall demise pretty well for the *Orbit*. I read the details at breakfast the next morning. There were a few items I hadn't known about.

One, Andy Best, when questioned by Mullin, stated he had been headed off from his appointment with McCall at the Tallyho by a nine o'clock telephone call. Some guy, whose voice Best said he didn't recognize, canceled the meeting.

Then, Mullin claimed he had a hot angle he was working on. He promised the press a break within twenty-four hours. A large order, but it made good reading.

Mullin was in his office at Headquarters when I stopped around to see him shortly after ten. The hard-hitting copper didn't look too happy. He dug up one of his best sneers when I sat down opposite his desk.

"What's yours, Castle?"

"Maybe you won't believe me, but I want to report a near-snatch. Also, the theft of my wallet with sixty bucks in it and an automatic."

"You've got a license to carry firearms?" Mullin growled. I let that go and he leaned forward. "Who's the dame that called in late last night and said you'd been picked up by a couple of gunmen and lifted out of her apartment?"

I sat up straighter. So Putzi Russell had buzzed the law! That meant she hadn't been tied in with the two hoodlums who had lugged me off to the garage. More than ever, now, I was convinced Alf Linkhart was back of the incident.

"I haven't the slightest idea—who called you, Captain?"

Mullin gave me a dirty look. He reached for a pad and pencil.

"What are the particulars? Who heisted you?"

I told him. Mullin's expression was bored when he jotted the facts down. That is, until I mentioned the garage. Then his colorless eyes gave me a fishy stare.

"Know where you were?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

Mullin sighed. "Okay, Castle. I'll put a man on it. I'll let you know if anything develops."

I could imagine how much work he'd have the department do for me. Instead of taking the brush-off and ducking, I sat further back in the chair.

"While I'm here, Captain, how about a slice out of the McCall pie? I've been wondering about the knife that decorated him."

"You don't have to. No prints. The killer wiped it clean."

"You didn't happen to find out where it came from?"

Mullin grinned. "Sure, I did. Right out of the Tallyho's kitchen. So what?"

"So you must have an idea."

"Several." He screwed his mouth up and looked at me quickly. "I think Linkhart did it. What do you think?"

I shrugged. "My thoughts aren't worth a thin dime. But why Linkhart?"

"Mebbe," Mullin said slowly, "Alf and McCall were doing business together. Mebbe Linkhart didn't like his cut, and decided to do something about it."

"Could be." I got to my feet. "Only I don't think so."

I LEFT him to mull that over, and hit uptown for the Reginald.

I was careful nobody tailed me. No-

body did. The day clerk at the hotel told me that Red Herrin was upstairs. I got out of the elevator on the ninth floor. Red, in a worn dressing gown, opened the door.

"Well, Johnny. Come on in."

I entered a room lined with framed photographs of past and present maulers. Red, in characteristic fighting crouch, graced the wall over Silk's flat-top desk. The photo of him had been snapped a long time ago.

Even in his prime Herrin hadn't been any world shaker. Just a third-rate heavyweight with a piece of bric-a-brac under his lower lip. He was tall, red-headed, with a pair of shoulders custom-made for piano moving and a pot under his belt that had swelled out in the last few months.

"Condolences, Red. Too bad about Silk."

"Terrible, Johnny." Herrin's voice was dull. "I keep blamin' myself. If I'da been with him it wouldn'ta happened."

"How is it you weren't?"

"I had to go over to Jersey to see my brother-in-law. He got hit by a taxi. One stem broke below the knee. I heard the news about Silk on the radio and come right back."

"Any ideas?"

"Not one, Johnny! I couldn't sleep, tryin' to dope it. All I know is Silk says he's goin' to the Tallyho to rumble with Andy Best. Where's the poison in that? So I let him go."

We talked about McCall for a few minutes more. Then I went back to the office.

"Message for you, Mr. Castle."

Beth Wheaton, one of the switch-board operators, saw me when I went in and shoved a memo in my face. It was from Putzi Russell. It said she wanted to see me as soon as possible.

"Putzi?" Beth laughed. "If I had a name like that I'd take something for it."

"Yeah, what?"

"Probably gas."

I didn't bother to answer. Turning on my heel I started uptown.

When I arrived at the Burgoyne, the girl with the blue eyes was dressed in a neat skirt and white blouse, and she looked younger and less sophisticated than at any time I had seen her. But

this time I took no chances of intruders. I closed the hall door of the bedchamber-living room and turned the key in the lock. Then I turned around and faced her.

"You're all right?" Putzi led off.

"All in one piece—so far." She slipped her fingers into mine and I hung on for a long minute.

"The boys who took me away from here, treated me to a drive up around Yonkers," I said. "Somebody ought to tell them about the rubber situation. To make a short story shorter, after a couple of them were unexpectedly taken unconscious, I hopped out of the car, hid in some friendly woods and got a lift as far as a subway. A New Lots train brought me back okay."

"You don't think I invited those crashers in, Mr. Castle?" Her tone was worried. "They must have followed you. I couldn't even warn you, they came in so fast."

I sat down beside her on a four-foot divan. I could smell the perfume on her hair. It was something the angels themselves must have distilled. When she moved her shoulder brushed mine. I didn't feel much like talking. It was enough to just sit there and admire her. Nevertheless I made a try.

"Let's see. Last night before we were so rudely interrupted we were speaking about Blynn. Cary Blynn. I asked you what he was doing here. Remember?"

SHE turned her head. She didn't say anything for a minute. The red lips swam before me like a couple of hot-house roses. The fifty-dollar-a-dozen kind.

"Yes, Cary was here. He left just before you came in." She dropped her voice to a husky note. "I've thought it over. I do want you to help me—in case the police find out I saw McCall. So I'm going to go clean on it."

My heart picked up a faster beat. She pushed her shoulders back against the wall. As she crossed one trim ankle over the other, I caught a glimpse of symmetrically filled silk hosiery. Or maybe it was rayon. Gorgeous in either case.

"It was about Cary that I went to see McCall," she said.

I absorbed that. "You're—in love—with Blynn?"

She smiled faintly. The lashes came

down over the blue stars she used for eyes. She shook her head slightly.

"I like him—I have reason to. Cary Blynn's my brother. Blynn's my right name. Putzi Russell's my stage name."

"Oh!" was all I could manage.

"How much do you know about Silk McCall?" she went on, quickening her words. "You're a sports writer. Outside of his ring activities, how much do you really know about McCall's private life?"

"Nothing."

"Then I'll tell you something." She glanced at the door as if to make sure it was still locked. Her fingers tightened over my arm. "Silk McCall and Alf Linkhart went into business together. Black market business. To sell meat. You must have read about the illegal meat-peddlers in the papers. What they do and how they do it—like the old bootlegging trade—only safer!"

That was news. I digested it. I recalled what Mullin had let drop about Alf Linkhart and McCall being in business together. The captain had already stuck his nose in it.

"Where does your brother fit in?"

I could see the pulse in her throat again, where the collar of the white blouse opened. She parted her lips.

"Silk wanted him to give up piano playing and deal in meat. Cary didn't tell me. He told Lolita Diaz—he's engaged to her. She got scared and came to me."

"And you went to McCall? That's why you slipped up to Room Two-A last night?"

Putzi nodded. She twined her fingers together nervously.

"I told Silk McCall that if he took Cary in with him I'd report him to the F.B.I. He laughed at me. I didn't stay in the room more than a minute or two. Just long enough to warn him. He was still laughing when I left him."

"Then you came downstairs and popped into the telephone booth. Who were you calling?"

"I phoned Red Herrin at the Reginald. I know Red quite well. I knew he had a lot of influence with McCall. I thought maybe he'd do something for me. But he wasn't in. I called him twice within an hour. Both times there was no answer."

"Who do you think killed Silk?"

She didn't say anything for a minute. A warm flush tinted the velvet skin. She looked straight at me.

"I'm not sure, but if I had to lay any bets I'd put them on Linkhart as being the one. I think Silk was trying to chisel. That's just a guess. This black market stuff is bound to cause trouble."

A knock on the door stopped her. Putzi got up. She looked at me and from me to the door. The knock sounded again, sharper, more insistent.

"Open it," I told her.

She did and Detective Hartley, Captain Mullin's stooge, walked in. He saw me and raised an eyebrow, smiling with the corner of his mouth. I didn't like anything about it—his being there, or the smile, or the way he looked at Putzi.

"You're Miss Russell?"

Putzi stared at him. I walked in between them.

"What's this about, Larry?"

"Police business." Hartley's smile broadened. "Mullin wants to re-question this dame. Any arguments?" He waited a minute or two and looked past me at the girl. "C'mon, sister. Get your hat and we'll travel downtown together."

CHAPTER V

THE COAT



D WHEELER was playing watchdog at the Tallyho. Wheeler let me in some twenty minutes later when I knocked on the door. He was so glad to see anybody that he beamed.

"Look, Castle. One of the best bars on the street and double padlocked. Tie that."

"Tough," I commented. "Where's Linkhart?"

"Downtown. Mullin wanted to ask him some more question. Between the two of us, I think Alf's guilty."

"Who's around?"

"Ben Grant. A porter and a cook. Why?"

"Mind if I snoop? I was here last night, as you know. I've got an interest in the thing."

Wheeler laughed. "Burn this dump down and see if I care."

I went upstairs. I checked on the private rooms along the corridor. I

(Continued on page 88)



Who Wants to Murder the Dollar?

By WENDELL L. WILLKIE

WHO wants to murder the American dollar?

No American does, of course. But whether we want to or not, that's what we'll do—murder the dollar by dosing it with the deadly poison of inflation—unless we realize what we're doing and then stop doing it.

We can easily save the dollar, not only from death, but even from serious disease, if each of us will start each day like this:

1. Ask yourself, "What am I going to buy today that I don't really need?" Give yourself an honest answer, no fudging, and then—*don't buy it.*

2. Ask yourself, "Can I possibly spare the cash to buy war stamps, or a bond, or buy life insurance, or pay a debt? If you can, do it that day.

3. Ask yourself, "Am I a good citizen? Or am I a black market sucker—a ration chiseler—a scarce goods hoarder?" Answer that one with deeds, not words.

Who wants to murder the American dollar?



"A fortune, my friend," the inspector whistled. Then an ominous silence gripped the room

FOR THE CAUSE

By RAY VICKER

*Jean Dupin sold out to the Nazis for wealth and security—
but there was one factor he hadn't reckoned with in his plans!*

FOR the hundredth time Jean Dupin fondled his fat stomach, making sure the belt still reposed beneath his checkered vest. The Nazis hadn't given him much time to pack. Hurriedly, he had hidden the diamonds beneath the brass rivets of his ornamented belt—a last minute stroke of genius.

Across from him, Josephine hunched against the window admiring her peaked face in the faint reflection of the glass. The train slowed down, puffed to a reluctant stop along the quay.

"There are so many fools in this world," he mused aloud, thinking of the border inspector who had missed the stones in his search.

"But you are not, *cher ami*, always you are smart. That is why I like you." Josephine turned slowly so as to give him a full view of her handsome profile.

He beamed, flashing a row of gold teeth under his waxed strip of moustache.

The white buildings of the Spanish town glistened in the youthful sun. A

burro ambled across the cobblestones of the sleepy street, followed by a bare-legged urchin clutching a cudgel in his little hand. The dock stretched out to meet the ship anchored in the bay, the ship that would soon carry them away from Europe's troubles.

"Too bad about Flaubert," he said. His satisfied smirk betrayed no concern. It had been Flaubert, his ex-partner in the wine exporting company, who had suggested investing their profits in diamonds. Dupin, not a connoisseur of precious stones, had allowed Flaubert to complete the transaction.

All small businessmen of Paris had feared the depreciation of the franc. But inflation had no effect on the value of the blue-white, sparkling gems concealed in Dupin's belt.

"Do you regret your former husband's untimely end?" A morbid note entered his voice. His plump face rounded, leaned forward, expectant.

"No," she snapped.

She pursed her lips. Indignation colored the smooth complexion, hard-

earned by so many tedious visits to Madame Bouclay's Beauty Shop. "I lived like a dog because he would do nothing to curry favor with the Germans when he might have profited by your example."

"You are right, sweetheart. One must always recognize those who hold power. Only in that way can one enjoy the comforts of life."

He patted his belt, tenderly. That large lump would be the "Sultana," worth a fortune alone.

"Flaubert was a fool," he said thoughtfully, "conniving with the English and the Free French. Better I collect the reward from the Germans than someone else. With him out of the way I have the diamonds, the reward, permission to leave France, and you, *ma petite*."

She laughed pleasantly, using a compact to draw a new pattern for already painted lips. She had no regrets.

"The joke is, he never knew." Dupin gloated over his own cleverness. His half-bald head reflected the rising sun filtering into the compartment.

Scornfully Dupin repeated Flaubert's farewell message: "I know you will understand, Dupin. I did it to help the cause of Free France." Dupin snorted contemptuously.

A SQUAD of armed soldiers marched past the windows. Doors slammed. A chorus of voices jabbered. The custom officers were conducting their inspection.

Dupin shifted uncomfortably, drew forth the German visa. It had performed wonders with all previous inspectors.

The compartment door opened. A heavy-set, uniformed Spaniard with straight lips and the expression of a brick wall whipped the papers from Dupin's moist hand. The custom officer noticed the German stamp, paused. He forced an apologetic smile, and rushed through the examination with an obvious attempt to please.

Josephine suppressed a yawn. Lead weights slipped from Dupin's shoulders. This inspection would be as cursory as the others. He grinned with good humor.

Then a bombshell exploded in the ivory tower of his short-lived complacency.

"Your papers are in order, *senor* and *senora*. You will be allowed to go aboard

[Turn page]

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ship. There you will prepare for search."

Dupin's apple cheeks ripened. The tips of his mustache drooped. Josephine's boredom fled. The custom officer whistled, gestured to a subordinate.

"Juan," he barked, motioning.

A thin wisp of a man leaped forward. Decayed teeth peeked between thick lips, curled in a habitual smirk. His sharp, ferret eyes bored into the Frenchman. Dupin fumbled with his belt, looked away.

Juan understood his superior. Without further orders he led the man and woman across the station platform and up the planked dock.

The ship huddled against the pier, ashamed of her colorful coat of neutral paint. All the color of the dirty, cargo ship lay on her hull plates.

Dupin's feet dragged up the gangway. Blood drained from his florid face. He had reason for uneasiness, with a fortune in diamonds concealed in his belt. They were the fruit of his years in business with Flaubert. With the stones he could anticipate a life of ease in South America. But they were contraband. If they were found . . .

Josephine clung to him, afraid.

Juan leered as he opened the door of their stateroom. Boots echoed hollowly on the shellacked steel. No carpets graced the passenger deck of this little steamer. A dirt-coated washbowl hid in a corner.

"We must be thorough," Juan explained. "Last week a Frenchman attempted to smuggle out his family jewels. He had hidden them in his belt." The inspector's hoarse laughter jarred a water pitcher perched precariously on the edge of the bed-table.

Dupin gasped weakly, his face the pallor of a church candlestick.

"Did—did you kill him?"

"Oh, no. Nothing like that. We merely confiscated the jewelry." The inspector opened a suitcase, carelessly dumped it on the bed. With reckless disregard for the contents, he fumbled in the pile. He plunged into the baggage with the intensity of a hound on a scent.

At last he rose, obviously disappointed. Eyes wandered about the room, settled on Dupin's oval stomach.

"Your belt. Let me see it." Routine stamped his demand.

Josephine slumped weakly onto a canvas deck chair.

"Belt?" Dupin mumbled, his tongue a dry piece of leather. "Oh! The belt!" He attempted jocosity. "Is it not handsome? A gift from my partner the last Christmas before France fell." His voice cracked, half-hysterically.

"Come! Come! Take it off."

Reluctantly Dupin unclasped the buckle. Slowly, and carefully he removed the wide belt. A cluster of shiny rivets formed a patternwork on the surface of the rich leather.

"It is heavy." Juan weighed the belt idly in his hand.

Dupin stood immobile. A bead of sweat trickled down his nose, poised on the tip, and dropped to the floor.

A knife flashed into Juan's hand. With a deft flip he pried up one of the rivets.

"*Dios.*" His eyes bulged. He sucked a quick breath through his decayed teeth, and his evil grin widened. A pale stone rested in his palm.

Dupin choked, raised a hand to his throat, moaned.

The inspector slashed fiercely with his blade, excavating more diamonds.

"A fortune, my friend." He whistled. His grin faded. An ominous silence chilled the room.

DUPIN'S shoulders sagged. He saw the fortune slipping away from him, a lifetime of work spent in vain. Without the diamonds he would be a poor man in a strange land. Except for the German reward money, he had nothing.

Juan's smile returned, now shrewd and calculating. He stepped quickly to the door, glanced up and down the alleyway, then spun around.

"My family is very poor, senor," he whined. "These stones I could give to my government. But I would get nothing."

Dupin's throat knotted. His heart hammered like a rivet gun against his ribs. He could understand bribery.

"Perhaps I could make it worth your while to forget the belt," he tremulously offered.

"*Si, senor.*" Juan waited, eagerly.

With shaking hand Dupin drew out his wallet, bulging with the German money. He separated a handful of bills, hesitated, then held out the entire amount.

"I have eight thousand German marks. It is all the money I have left." His hand

shook. Now it was excitement, not fear, that vibrated his muscles.

Juan wet his lips greedily.

"Si. Here is the belt." He avariciously traded the diamonds for the money. He pocketed the bills, insolently winked at Josephine, then slouched from the state-room, whistling.

A moment later, the deep-throated moan of the ship's horn blew the parting signal. The steady throb of engines pushed the boat away from the dock. The last barrier had been surmounted. Now they were free with their fortune.

Dupin dripped tears of happiness. Like a miser, he fondled the diamonds in his hand.

"Look, Josephine," he gloated. He held the gleaming Sultana to the light streaming through the porthole. His trembling fingers fumbled. The diamond slipped, then fell with a dull tinkle to the steel deck.

Dupin stooped, paused. A low cry escaped his lips.

He straightened slowly, eyes glued to the crack that nearly split the stone in half.

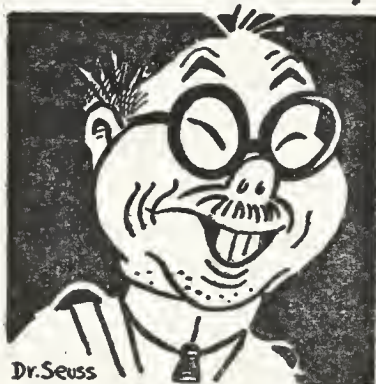
"Glass," he mumbled, horrified. Quickly he examined the other stones. "All glass. Every one."

Josephine bit out a sob.

Stupefied, he let the baubles cascade between his fingers to the deck. Through his mind echoed Flaubert's farewell message, now poignantly clear.

"I know you will understand, Dupin. I did it to help the cause of Free France."

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DEATH WITH MUSIC

(Continued from page 82)

passed 2A and turned the corner of the hall. A gents' washroom was on one side. On the other, an iron ladder led up to a roof scuttle.

A regulation fire department red light was beside the ladder. The word EXIT was painted beneath it. I climbed the ladder and looked hard at the handle of the scuttle before I turned it. I wondered if Mullin had checked it for prints.

The scuttle tipped back on well-oiled hinges and I stuck my head out of the opening. That gave me a view of the flat expanse of the night club's tarred and graveled roof. Toward the rear of the roof, on the east side, another iron ladder, acting as a fire-escape, hugged the brick wall all the way down to the alley below.

I went down to the kitchen. Benny Grant and the cook were checking the stuff in one of the huge iceboxes.

"All this meat and no potatoes." Grant pulled a face. "The boss said we might never open again. What do you think, Castle?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

Benny Grant left the cook to put the meat away and walked to the door with me.

"That stuff's going to spoil if we have to keep it here."

"Send it to a hospital," I suggested. "Leave the floor show out and they'll appreciate it. Linkhart can get all the meat he wants, I understand. What are you worried about?"

"Me—not a thing." Grant's double row of porcelain choppers glimmered when he laughed. "I told that to Her-rin last night."

I pulled open the kitchen door. "What did Red say?"

Grant laughed again. "Nothing much. I hear they've got the boss downtown now. He'd better make it good."

"He will," I said, and went upstairs to the foyer.

Ed Wheeler had a tabloid spread and was lapping up the gory details of the crime.

"Find anything, Castle?"

"A lot of meat. Need any?"

"Me? Nix, I'm strictly a vegetarian these days. How are you off for lettuce?"

The minute I left the Tallyho, I knew a tail had picked me up.

Down Sixth Avenue and across town. It was a swell day for walking. The only trouble was I kept thinking about Mullin and Putzi Russell. What he might dig up, what she might spill and the mess he might get her into.

IT DIDN'T look good. The last thing I wanted was a splash of publicity for the girl with the blue eyes. And she'd get plenty if Mullin thought she was holding out on him.

The tail was a little guy in a gray suit with a snap brim, lightweight felt jauntily perched on one side of his head. He didn't look dangerous, but I remembered the old gag about the book and its jacket. Mullin's man? Or an agent of the people who had motored me up to Yonkers last night?

The thing began to tie together. Captain Mullin had shown interest when I mentioned being confined in a garage. Garages were places where they kept trucks. Trucks could be used to move meat. Meat had been McCall's racket—illegal meat. One and one added up to two and left me mentally confronting Linkhart again.

The ex-con was afraid of me. Afraid of what I might know and how I might use it. The old power of the press again! I reached the Hotel Reginald and cut into it while the little bird in the gray suit was turning the corner.

This time I didn't pause at the clerk's desk. Trying to look like a resident who knew where he was going, I stepped into the nearest elevator and said, "Ninth, please."

There was no answer to my knock. Red had gone out. That suited me fine. Only the door was locked. I didn't know what to do about that until I spotted a maid coming down the hall with an armful of towels.

"I'm terribly sorry," I told her. "I've forgotten my key."

She was either dumb or I looked more respectable than I imagined. Without a word she reached into her apron pocket and fished out a passkey.

"You're welcome," she said, taking my quarter with a smirk.

I shut the door behind me, breathing a little faster.

The framed photos of the leather

[Turn page]

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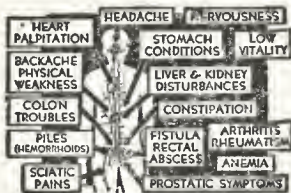
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pushers on the wall glowered suspiciously down at me. I let them look for a minute or two. Then I began to prowl around.

There were three rooms in all, not counting a bath. One was the late Mr. McCall's *chambre a coucher*. It connected with another bedroom—Herrin's. I crossed the threshold and pulled the shade up a little. I spied a closet.

That was what I wanted, principally. Just an ordinary closet full of clothes. Clothes, perhaps, that might contain a coat made of queer moss-like material, soft and spongy. A coat worn by the silent man, with the glass chin, on my night ride north so few hours ago. The party I had socked, head down, on the floor of the sedan.

If it had been Red Herrin, I had something to toss to Mullin. Herrin hadn't been with McCall, but he had been in the kitchen of the Tallyho. The knife with the ebony handle had come out of that same kitchen. The knife that stuck out of Silk's chest.

There were four suits and three sports jackets. Loud, flamboyant garments, befitting a former pug whose taste was all in his gloves. My hand touched a familiar spongy sleeve. I lifted out a checked, tan jacket. The material was unusual, to say the least. It looked like terry cloth only it was wool.

Then I had a surprise.

Somewhere in the other room a door opened and closed. I dodged back of the closet door. That gave me a bias view through the bedroom to the living room. Red had come in and was throwing down a sheaf of mail.

My one idea was to get out—quick!

THAT was wishful thinking on my part. The way Herrin took off his hat, sat down, lighted a cigarette and began opening the letters seemed to indicate that he intended to stick around awhile. I gave the window in the room a gander. Nothing below the sill except nine stories of painted brick. I couldn't get out of the suite without going through the living room. For five minutes, maybe ten, I stood there sweating, holding on to the jacket.

Herrin got up finally. He walked out of view. I heard him unhook a receiver, give a number to the girl on the switchboard in the lobby.

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"That's right, sister," he said. "Give me a ring when you get it. Thanks."

He hung up and the next minute his footsteps sounded on the wood of the floor beyond the bedroom door.

He saw me before I dropped the coat. His hand slid in under his vest. I made a straight lunge for the door. Herrin whipped out a gun. I crashed into him before he could aim, much less fire it.

The jaw that had stood me in good stead last night beckoned like a light-house. I swung a left at it. But he was too fast. He let it flick harmlessly by with a jerk of his head. His arm went around me and the nose of the gun dug into my belly.

"Smellin' around, Johnny? *Tek-tek!* You're old enough to know what happens to guys who do that. Start reachin' if you know what's good for you."

I did.

He shoved me up against the bedroom wall, drawing away a pace and keeping his gun on a heart line—my heart. The weapon looked as big as a Russian siege gun. It was probably a Luger. How he carried it around without it bulging him out of shape was a mystery.

[Turn page]

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"So you were the host who took me buggy riding last night?" I said.

He grinned crookedly. "That's right, Johnny. If you hadn't caught me by surprise you'd be three feet under some wet ground right now."

"You mean if those two gorillas had brushed up on their target practice. Herrin, I'm a little sorry about all this."

"What do you mean?"

"They'll dust the chair off for you and have it waiting. You bumped Silk. How do you think you're going to get away with it?"

A laugh shook him. A deep, silent laugh that wasn't nice to listen to.

"Sure, I bumped him and I'll bump you just as easy. I knifed McCall because he wouldn't give me an in on the new gravy." He nodded. "Mebbe you're interested, Johnny. What do the cops call it—motive? That's what my favorite tab printed this mornin'. 'What was the motive behind the McCall slay-in'?' You've got it now—you know more than the cops and the papers put together!"

"He wouldn't give you an in?"

The laugh shook Herrin again. "The toad! After all I done for him. Okay. I figured it out careful. What's to keep me from takin' over. Linkhart? That load of baloney? Once I have Silk's cus-

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tomers, prices and accounts, I can make Linkhart get down and clean my shoes. Okay. So I stick the boss and now I've got to blow you up to make it even. Say your prayers, Johnny."

There was a quiet tap on the door. Red Herrin's strained eyes flickered in the direction of the living room. A side-long, hasty glance, but it was all I wanted, all I needed.

HERRIN'S Luger roared like a cannon. Something scorched my face as I hung a stiff one on his glass jaw. That dazed him, so I played rough. Anything went. I stuck a knee in his abdomen and socked his face with the same amount of power I had put behind last night's clout.

I heard the Luger bang to the floor. There was a haze in front of my eyes. Herrin's arms were around me. He put on the pressure and I remembered Alf Linkhart saying something about keeping clear or running the chance of having my pan bent out of shape.

A body blow rocked me down to my ankle bones. Herrin slugged and I slugged back, aiming for his crockery chin. He was pounds heavier, but the pot under his belt had slowed him some, and he couldn't take it in the face. I made a grab for his throat and got it.

[Turn page]

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I hung on—like a terrier—digging my thumbs into the vulnerable spots on either side of his windpipe. Sweat rolled down into my eyes. My breath was like a furnace in my lungs.

But I stayed with it and that did it!

We hit the floor together—I on top. There was still some fight left in him. The big gun was only inches away. I picked it up and tapped him on the head.

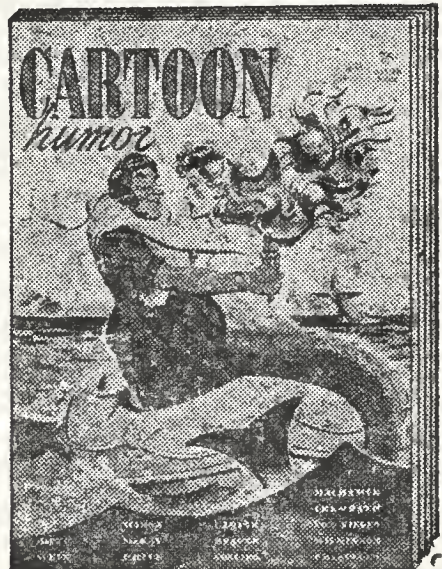
Then the living-room door burst open and the little guy in the gray suit with a cop in uniform, and another lug I recognized as running with Mullin's pack, came in. . . .

PUTZI RUSSELL nee Blynn looked at me through the shaded table light. We were at the fashionable Spinnaker on East Fifty-fifth Street, listening to high class music and eating plenty of expensive chow.

It was the same night.

Putzi was temporarily unemployed. I had finished a busy afternoon at the Orbit, collaborating with Bill Jamison on the windup of the McCall *opus*. Herin and Linkhart occupied a pair of cells, separately, and Putzi had just gotten through asking me if I'd like to be her brother's best man Thursday morning at the Little Church Around the Corner.

A LAUGH ON EVERY PAGE



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I told her I'd love that.
 "Why not make it a double-header?"
 I suggested. "Maybe they'll give us a discount."

She looked at me. The blue eyes were certainly heavenly. Bluer than ever with the table light in them and laughter crinkling the corners.

"You're a guy in a hurry, Johnny. And I hardly know you. I don't know you."

"Well, I'm taking the same chance," I said. "That's life—chances."

"Come on, stop being silly and let's dance. You know, not hoofing tonight makes me feel funny."

We got up and went out on the floor.

"I hardly ever dance and I feel funny. Look, is it a deal? I'll give you a blueprint on my career, past and present. What else do you want?"

She smiled up at me. The satin skin was like ivory. She wore a sort of coral colored dress, cut low all around.

"Six months—to get used to you, Johnny. Fair enough?"

Maybe the customers were watching. I didn't know. I didn't care. I stood still and my hands slid up her arms until they came to her powdered shoulders. It might have been imagination, but I had the impression the red lips were waiting for the business I gave them.

"It's a deal!" I said.

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A MATTER OF DIALECT

(Concluded from page 68)

"We know better. Miss Martel here put the finger on you right away."

The girl? This stupid American girl with yellow hair?

"How you know?" Hoki demanded. "How you know I am not Chinese?"

"As soon as you opened your mouth," Alice said, "you put your foot in it. Kee Sung, poor old man, always had trouble with his 'r's.' He always said 'velly' instead of 'very.' But you had just the other kind of trouble—you couldn't pronounce your 't's.' You said 'prease' instead of 'please.' And I read somewhere that that's a sure way to tell a Jap!"

Staring, fascinated, into her blazing blue eyes, Hoki knew he had been cheated. He had been double-crossed by two women on a street car who thought that Americans couldn't tell the difference between a Jap and a Chinese.

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JAMES P. WEBB

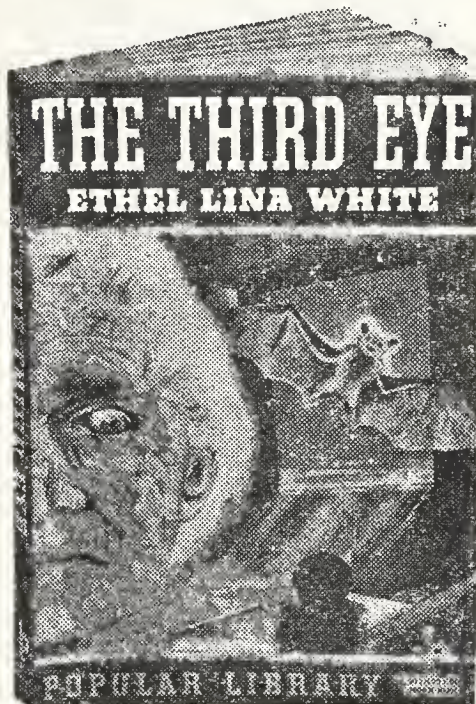
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Diamonds are precious. As you know, the war has greatly limited the supply of genuine diamonds and prices have gone up and up and up—so this offer of a genuine diamond ring for only \$4.95 is all the more amazing. Now, may absolutely be your last chance to get a genuine diamond at such an unheard-of low price. Each and every diamond in these rings has been certified to us by the ring manufacturer as an exquisite, rose cut genuine diamond. There is no question of the quality or beauty of this ring and we are glad to send it to you on 10-days' trial so that you can see for yourself what a wonderful Diamond ring you are getting. Mail the coupon.

SOLITAIRE
RING
\$4.95
Ten
Days
Trial

GIVEN

**Matching Design
Wedding RING—
Our Gift for Promptness**

Deeply embossed, yellow gold plate wedding ring matching the genuine diamond solitaire ring in design and beauty included without extra charge if your order is received promptly. This lovely wedding ring matches the solitaire and makes the perfect bridal pair. You want them both, so don't delay.

Mail the Coupon Today

No other type of ring so beautifully expresses the sentiment of true love as a solitaire and this classic romance design, 10 Karat, yellow gold ring sets off the fiery rose cut genuine diamond to the very best advantage. A life-long token of love and affection. Every woman deserves the crowning glory of a lovely, sparkling, genuine diamond engagement ring and with it a lovely wedding ring—if you act today, you can still realize your dreams of owning beautiful rings. Wear on 10 days money-back guarantee. Remember, our supply of these wonderful rings is very limited. After our present stock is depleted we will have to turn down orders. Don't be disappointed. Send the coupon right away.

EMPIRE DIAMOND CO.

DEPT. 82-D

JEFFERSON, IOWA

FOR YOUR RING SIZE

Use this handy ring measure. Tie string around finger, cut and mark off size on scale at left.

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10



Send This Priority Coupon Today

SEND NO MONEY

Get-acquainted offer:—Ladies who have always wanted exquisite, expensive-looking diamond rings will be delighted with this opportunity to get a genuine diamond solitaire right now when prices are being raised because of scarcity. If you act now, we will send you a smart, new, 10-karat, Yellow Gold ring set with a genuine, lustrous, rose cut diamond center stone. The classic design of this ring is one of the most popular from Broadway to Hollywood and expresses the true sentiment of love and romance. The diamond in this ring is in the latest rose cut for fire and brilliance and is a symphony in mysterious beauty.

On our liberal, 10-day trial offer you have the opportunity of examining these rings and wearing them or asking your friends about them before deciding whether you want to keep this genuine diamond solitaire or not. Send no money with this order, just your name and ring size. Your package will be sent immediately and you pay postman the small price of \$4.95 for the Engagement ring plus a few cents for tax and mailing cost on arrival; the matching design Wedding ring is given for promptness. After your rings arrive, you have 10 days to wear them and if for any reason you are not entirely satisfied and do not agree that the solitaire is worth at least several times its small cost you may return the rings and your money will be returned promptly. Don't delay in sending the coupon. War conditions limit our supply of these gorgeous genuine diamond solitaire rings.

EMPIRE DIAMOND CO.

Dept. 82-D, Jefferson, Iowa

Send the Genuine Diamond Solitaire Ring and the Wedding Ring in lovely gift box. I understand I can return the rings within 10 days for any reason and you will refund promptly.

Ring Size.....

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

Think twice before you gobble !



Food is the mightiest weapon of all. This holiday season, buy and cook only what you need. Eat it all. Waste nothing. Share with those who need it most. Food Fights for Freedom.



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Clear heads choose Calvert"

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The whiskey with the "Hoppy Blending"

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